



Thank You for the Rain

2017 • 87 minutes • Directed by Julia Dahr • Distributed by Icarus Films
English, Kikamba, and Kiswahili with English subtitles

Thank You for the Rain is a collaborative film made by Kisilu Musya, a Kenyan farmer, climate fighter, and video diarist, and Julia Dahr, a Norwegian filmmaker. For five years, Kisilu used his camera to capture the lives of his family members, the atmosphere of his village, and the impact of climate change in Kenya.

In addition to filming floods, droughts, and storms, he documented the real human costs of the climate crisis: His kids are sent home from school when he can't pay the fees because of a failed harvest. Men are moving from their villages to towns in search of work. Food supplies are pinched, and family tensions are rising. Despite these hardships, Kisilu emerges as an activist, organizing his community to plant trees to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.

Three excerpts with a total running time of 21 minutes are also included for viewing if time is short. These clips provide a more tightly focused introduction to the impact of climate change on subsistence farming throughout East Africa.





CURATOR:

David N.M. Mborra

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WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Thank You for the Rain is a compelling firsthand account of the effects of climate change through the eyes of some of the most vulnerable people on the planet. As a portrayal of one man’s resolute efforts, the film demonstrates that ordinary people do have agency to confront climate change. Indeed, Kisilu’s video diaries, which are embedded throughout the film, are especially evocative. The diaries give a face—or faces, actually—to those who are on the front lines of climate change, allowing them to share their experiences in their own voices and showcase how they are fighting back. This is a timely production.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| African Studies | Gender Studies |
| Climatology | Geography |
| Dryland Farming | Media Studies |
| Environmental Science | Political Science |
| Environmental Studies | Sociology |
| Film Studies | Sustainability |

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

Thank You for the Rain delivers a clear and urgent message. The people who suffer the worst effects of climate change are the ones who have contributed little, or nothing at all, to it. To make matters worse, these are the people who are most vulnerable and have the least means to mitigate its impact and adapt to the change.

BACKGROUND

Is it weather or is it climate?

The distinction between weather and climate is crucial to appreciating what climate change really is.

Weather refers to the state of the atmosphere at a particular place and time, accounting for such factors as heat, dryness, sunshine, wind, and rain and other precipitation. Daily weather forecasts provide this information. Climate refers to the general trend of these weather conditions over long periods of time—think decades, centuries, and even millennia. As a quote often attributed to Mark Twain explains, “Climate is what we expect; weather is what we get.”

The term “global warming” refers to the gradual increase in the average temperature of the earth’s atmosphere brought about by increased levels of carbon dioxide, chlorofluorocarbons, methane, and other

“This compelling human portrait asks what the future holds when clear evidence of climate change presents itself and the most powerful politicians in the world choose to do nothing.”

—Pat Mullen, *POV Magazine*

“*In Thank You for the Rain we see the frontlines in the battle against climate change. [It] should be a wakeup call for all.*

—Jan Egeland,
UN Under-Secretary-General for
Humanitarian Affairs (2003–06),
Co-chair of the UN High Level
Panel for Global Climate
Services (2009–10)

pollutants in the atmosphere. Because most weather conditions depend on the amount of heat energy (temperature) in the atmosphere, an increase in average atmospheric temperature over time also changes the weather conditions and, ultimately, the climate.

Sadly, many people, including political leaders, who should understand this distinction do not, or they willfully ignore the distinction for their own purposes. This is illustrated in the film by comments made by U.S. president Donald Trump, who was not among the 100 heads of state attending the Paris conference. (President Trump appears in a newscast at 1:14:38.) Apart from the film, U.S. Senator James Inhofe earlier called global warming [a hoax](#) and once famously brought a snowball onto the floor of the Senate as evidence that it was cold outside.

Describing the impacts of climate change

The usual way to describe climate change in school or in the media is by reciting statistics or pointing to a litany of future impacts: melting ice caps, rising sea levels, higher temperatures, unusual weather, bigger storms, floods, and increased carbon dioxide levels. The widely viewed 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* approached the subject in this fashion and convinced many people that global warming does exist and is due to human activities—and, in particular, to our burning of fossil fuels.

While the need to make a case by relying on scientific research is understandable, films of this kind often have limited reach and fail to resonate with diverse audiences. More films are needed that convey the impact of climate change on the lives of ordinary people who live in the low- and middle-income countries of the world like Kenya.

Thank You for the Rain takes this much-needed approach. In the film, we witness a firsthand account of the ways in which climate change is causing hardship in these often-ignored regions. This poignant account, as told by a man, his wife, and his family, describes these

hardships as well as their determination to cope with climate change, to fight against it, and to survive. The film demonstrates that even in these dire circumstances, ordinary people do have agency to confront the effects of climate change.





SYNOPSIS

The film is a portrait of Kisilu Musya, his wife, Christina, and their children. The couple's livelihood depends on subsistence farming in Kitui County, Kenya. As the film progresses, we witness Kisilu transform into a climate change activist and community leader. The film can be divided into **three sections**:

1. **Waiting for the rain** 00:00–30:53

Introducing Kisilu Musya and Christina Wayua Kisilu on their subsistence farm in Kenya

In this first section, we meet Kisilu and his family. They have been waiting a very long time for the seasonal rains; while this is not discussed in the film, it is the reality of subsistence farming families throughout Kenya and many other countries. The rains come; the season's crops are planted and then tended. The harvest is the source of the farmers' sustenance and their money for the year. Predictable weather patterns are essential for the welfare of such farming families. As such, Kisilu and his neighbors are greatly concerned that the rains are not falling as expected.



When at last the rains come, it is a joyous occasion for Kisilu's family. The children dance in the rain. Kisilu and Christina are visibly relieved. But this moment of happiness is fleeting: the downpour soon becomes a violent storm, which blows the roof off their modest family dwelling. This is also the moment when we understand the film's title and we glimpse the defining pragmatism of Kisilu Musya. In contemplating the circumstances and the damage by the storm, Kisilu says, "Thank you for the rain. But then, to me, it means migrating from the rain problem to the house problem. Now I am left with no house."



2. **From Kenya to Norway and back** 30:53–58:00

More rain, plus a flood

In the second section, Kisilu visits Norway at the invitation of Norwegian filmmaker Julia Dahr. Kisilu speaks at a conference on climate change and learns about its effects in Norway, as well as how people there organize to fight it. The Norwegian activists gift Kisilu with a motorcycle to help him with his community organizing work in Kenya. This visit seems to give Kisilu new resolve. Upon his return to Kenya, he steps up efforts to organize the community to plant trees.

However, these efforts keep him away from his family and work on his *shamba*, or subsistence farm. Soon enough, food for the family runs

The people most at risk for the worst effects of climate change are the ones that have contributed little, or nothing at all, to it.

low, money becomes tight, and Kisilu is forced to sell all his goats to keep the family fed and the children in school. Christina, while supportive, is none too happy that her husband is often away and work on the shamba is ignored. Their marriage is tested. As Christina says, “I am very proud of him. His community work is good. It has a lot of benefits to the community. But to me, I am the loser, I am losing. ... He is not available to do what we are doing in our farm.” Thus, in this sequence we bear witness to the personal cost of Kisilu’s activism.

3. Representing dryland farmers at the United Nations

COP21 in Paris 58:00–1:24:05

“I would take these leaders to live in my village—to starve.”

In the final sequence, Julia and the climate activists from Norway persuade the U.N. to invite Kisilu to represent dryland farmers, and Kisilu attends the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. At the conference, he gives a presentation to a rapt audience, which he concludes by urging everyone to work together to fight climate change. Once again, he is visibly energized by speaking with like-minded people. However, as the negotiations at the conference drag on and it is increasingly clear that things are not going as well as he had hoped, Kisilu becomes disillusioned. He realizes that the major players, who could enact meaningful policy to address climate change, have little regard for the well-being of those most affected by it. Here we witness the patent disconnect between the grassroots efforts by people who are affected directly, such as Kisilu and his family, and the dissonant global climate change conversation. As Kisilu remarks toward the end of the conference, “They never wanted to listen to me; they have not experienced it practically. ... If I had power, I would take these leaders to live in my village—to starve.”

Thank You for the Rain delivers a clear and urgent message. The people who experience the worst effects of climate change are ones who have contributed little, or nothing at all, to the change. To make matters worse, these are also the people who have the least means with which to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Nevertheless, Kisilu inspires us with his work. He demonstrates that while ordinary people may have few means, they can still take significant actions to slow and ultimately stop climate change. The film further highlights the stark inequality that exists in the world, revealing the obvious indifference by some of the world’s most privileged societies to confront the problem—even though they are the most responsible for it and have the most means by which to address it. As such, these countries and societies must do more to combat climate change.





KEY PEOPLE AND LOCATIONS

Kisilu Musya – a Kenyan subsistence farmer, climate change activist, and video diarist

Christina Wayua Kisilu – a subsistence farmer, wife to Kisilu, mother, and video diarist

Julia Dahr – a Norwegian filmmaker, narrator, and director of the film

Ndatani Village, Mutomo District, Kitui County, Kenya – the main setting for the film

Norway – the Scandinavian country where Julia lives, and Kisilu visits

Paris, France – the venue of the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP 21/CMP 11

FILM SEQUENCES

Introduction 0:00–19:00

On a shamba in Kenya, a family waits for the rain.

The rains come 19:00–31:00

One problem follows another: the rains arrive, but a storm damages the house.

Visiting Norway 31:00–34:00

Kisilu visits Norway and is encouraged by the work of its climate activists.

Return to Kenya 34:00–48:50

Kisilu expands his efforts to mobilize the community to plant trees. Julia Dahr returns to Kenya.

More rain, and floods 48:50–58:00

The fields are lush and green this year, but the rainfall turns into a flood.

Speaking out at the United Nations climate conference 58:00–1:24:10

Kisilu is invited to speak on behalf of dryland farmers. As talks collapse, he becomes frustrated and disillusioned by the indifference of the world's most privileged societies to the realities of climate change. He returns home and vows to keep fighting.



The film highlights the obvious indifference by some of the world's most privileged societies who have contributed the most to the problem and have the most means by which to address it.

EXCERPTS

Where time is short, the following clips, with a total running time of 21 minutes, can be assigned for viewing or shown in class. The clips can serve as an introduction to a discussion on subsistence farming in East Africa and the impact of climate change on farmers and their communities.

Suggested intro to the three short excerpts. Length: 21 minutes

Dryland farmers face climate change

In addition to being a film about a climate justice activist in rural Kenya, *Thank You for the Rain* is a portrait of the plight of small-scale farmers who depend on a stable, predictable climate to eke out a modest living, feed their families, and send their children to school. For them, in recent years, climate change has meant unpredictable weather, irregular rain, drought, storms, and flooding. The following three clips, filmed by Kisilu and Norwegian filmmaker Julia Dahr, provide a glimpse of the lives of the Kisilus on their family farm, located on the front lines of climate change in what is sometimes referred to as “the global south.”

These clips can be accessed and screened online via the **Clips** tab located on the screening page for *Thank You for the Rain*.

Excerpt clip 1 of 3: Introduction – Meet the Kisilus 00:00–10:38

Introducing Kisilu Musya and his family as they live through a prolonged drought on a shamba in Kenya. In addition to being a farmer, Kisilu is an activist, challenging his community to plant trees to make their farms more resilient in the face of a drought.

Excerpt clip 2 of 3: The rains come 19:00–26:00

There is joy when the rains come, but it is short-lived as a windstorm tears off the roof of the family dwelling.

Excerpt clip 3 of 3: Followed by a flood 49:00–53:00

The following year, Kisilu films a welcome rainstorm. But overnight, it turns into a flood that washes away many crops and topples papaya trees.

Many of the questions and activities provided for use with the full-length film will also apply to these excerpts.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

I. Understanding Climate Change

A) DISCUSSION: Evidence of climate change and its impact

Here is a series of discussion questions designed to help students think critically about what climate change is, what the evidence for it is, and what impact it could have. Please also see the background discussion “Is it weather or is it climate?” above.

– **What is the evidence that the earth’s climate has changed?**

What are the causes of climate change?

- You can find information about [warming trends](#), [greenhouse gases](#), and [teaching about climate change](#) at these and other sites listed below.

– **Which countries, and what economic activities, are most responsible for the factors that cause climate change?**

- You can find information about countries and industries that are contributing to greenhouse gas emissions on this [interactive chart](#).

- What are the major observed indicators of climate change? How do these indicators vary in different parts of the globe? What are the predicted trends in the major indicators of climate change?

- To answer these questions in a comprehensive way, consider the indicators of climate change in your town, region, or country as a whole. Then compare these indicators with those in other parts of the globe; for example, places mentioned in the film (Kenya, Norway, and France), places you have visited recently, or places you wish to visit one day.

- Explore these websites for more information:

[Environmental Protection Agency](#)

[European Commission](#)

[European Environmental Agency](#)

[Government of Canada](#)

[National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#)

[World Resources Institute](#)

[World Bank Group](#)



B) ACTIVITY: Focus on climate change in East Africa

Some fundamental knowledge of climate science is necessary to understand what we see in weather patterns and to know what we can expect in the future. Indeed, as the effects of climate change continue to unfold everywhere, scientists are discovering new and unexpected patterns that help explain some of the dramatic changes in weather in places like Kenya.

For example, consider the weather patterns in East Africa while this documentary was in production. When filming started, a prolonged drought was ravaging the area. However, by the late 2010s the situation had changed completely as floods followed drought. And while Kenya was experiencing months of heavy rainfall and damaging floods, Australia, across the Indian Ocean, was experiencing widespread drought and fires. Why? What is the mechanism driving these extremes, and how do these extremes affect people and other living things in East Africa?

In this activity, you will explore and develop an understanding of the climate drivers behind these devastating droughts and storms in East Africa. You will also learn how the changes favored one species of insect, the desert locust, so much that it has caused serious problems for the subsistence farmers and herders who are the majority of East Africa's population. As you complete the activity, you will come to understand that these events are also connected to similar events—devastating floods and bushfires—that occurred in Australia.

- **The geographic and socioeconomic contexts of the region in which Kisilu lives in East Africa.** Find East Africa on Google Maps or Google Earth, and consult any other resources that may help you answer the following questions.
 - What are the seven countries that make up East Africa?
 - What is the typical climate of East Africa?
 - What are the main activities by which most people in East Africa earn their livelihoods?

Note that East Africa is bordered by the Indian Ocean to the east and the Arabian Peninsula to the northeast. This geographic context is key to appreciating and understanding the series of activities that follow below.

“ *A look not only at the effects of climate change but also of the dedication it takes to be an activist and family man at the same time. ... An impassioned plea for climate change action.*

—Andrew Parker,
Toronto Film Scene



- **The phenomenon driving the climate changes in East Africa.**
 - The mechanism responsible for the unpredictable weather patterns in East Africa is known as the [Indian Ocean Dipole \(IOD\)](#), which you can read about [here](#). Also watch this [short video](#) about it. As you will learn, the IOD is equivalent to the other better-known, large-scale climate influencer, the [El Nino Southern Oscillations](#). However, the IOD was [discovered](#) quite recently and has been [linked to global warming](#).
 - In East Africa, the IOD was responsible for [terrible droughts](#) in the early 2010s and [devastating floods](#) in the late 2010s. As you might guess, the opposite effects were felt on the eastern shores of the Indian Ocean, [in Australia](#), and elsewhere.
- **The locust plague of the late 2010s in East Africa was caused by climate change.**
 - Watch this [short video](#) to learn about the locust plague in East Africa and how it is connected to the global climate change. You can also find more details by reading articles in [Nature](#) and [Inside Climate News](#).
 - The plague of locusts is a serious problem for [subsistence farmers](#) and [herders](#) in many parts of East Africa. These issues were covered by the media quite widely in 2020. You can learn more about the many dimensions of the problem by doing some internet research on the subject.

Supplementary Resources

You can find more information about the matters covered in this activity from these sources:

- [Inside Climate News](#) – an independent news organization that covers environmental science and related matters.
- [Nature](#) – a weekly international journal publishing the finest peer-reviewed research in all fields of science and technology. This journal also provides news and interpretation of topical and coming trends affecting science, scientists, and the wider public.
- [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#)
- [World Regional Geography: People, Places and Globalization](#)



II. Responding to Climate Change

A) DISCUSSION: Is tree planting an effective way to adapt to and mitigate climate change?

As you noticed, Kisilu is deeply committed to tree planting, believing it is effective against climate change. In this series of questions, you will discuss the meaning of mitigation and adaptation as they pertain to climate change. Further, you will evaluate the effectiveness of tree planting as a way to adapt to and mitigate climate change.



First, what do the terms “climate mitigation” and “climate adaptation” mean? As you may know, mitigation is the action of reducing the severity, seriousness, or painfulness of something. In the context of climate change, mitigation means pursuing strategies to lessen the severity of climate change by keeping the factors that drive it in check. Discuss the following questions based on the information you learned from “Understanding Climate Change” above.

- What are four steps that we could take as societies to mitigate climate change?
- What could you, your family, and your school do to mitigate the effects of climate change? [The David Suzuki Foundation](#) has suggestions.



As Kisilu tells his audience at community gatherings, preserving and restoring forests are important measures to mitigate climate change. Of course, trees and forests provide a variety of other benefits, too. Please answer these two questions about the effectiveness of tree planting as a climate change mitigation measure.

- Why and how do preserving and restoring forests help reduce the severity, seriousness, or painfulness of climate change?
- What other benefits do preserving and restoring forests provide?

Now dig a little deeper and address the question, “Just how effective is tree planting as a way to reduce the severity, seriousness, or painfulness of climate change?” The papers listed below will help you answer this question. As you will learn, there is a vigorous scientific debate about the effectiveness of tree planting as a mitigation measure against climate change.

- [The global tree restoration potential](#). A report by Jean-Francois Bastin, Yelena Finegold, Claude Garcia, Danilo Mollicone, Marcelo Rezende, Devin Routh, Constantin M. Zohner, Thomas W. Crowther. *Science*, July 5, 2019: 76–79.
- [“Planting trees doesn’t always help with climate change.”](#) Michael Marshall. *BBC Future*, May 26, 2020.
- [“Examining the Viability of Planting Trees to Help Mitigate Climate Change.”](#) Alan Buis. NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Nov 7, 2019.

“An excellent addition to undergraduate and graduate courses in environmental humanities or post-colonial ecocriticism. [The film] would complement the works of writer-activists such as Wangari Maathai, Arundhati Roy, and Ken Saro-Wiwa.

—Professor Alexander Fyfe,
African Studies Review

In contrast to mitigation, adaptation is a set of strategies to cope with the effects of climate change, given that it has already happened. Recall that the common meaning of adapt is to make (something) suitable for a new use or purpose. Adaptation is the action or process of adapting. As you saw in the film, climate change is a fact of life for Kisilu and his family. The rainfall patterns are unpredictable, extended droughts are the norm, and when the rain comes, it may take the form of a violent storm, unleashing a year’s worth of rain in just a day or two.

In this situation, what steps should governments, societies, and individuals take to adapt to climate change? Remember that the effects of climate change can be quite different from place to place. Therefore, to address this question meaningfully, you must think about particular places. Start with where you live, in your city, state, and country.

B) ACTIVITY: Get to know an environmental activist, Dr. Wangari Maathai

Are you familiar with the work of Dr. Wangari Maathai, a lifelong campaigner for environmental justice? She would have greatly approved of the work of Kisilu Musya. Wangari Maathai was the recipient of the 2004 [Nobel Peace Prize](#), largely because of her work with [The Green Belt Movement](#), which she founded in 1976, well before the need to take action on climate change was as widely recognized as it is today. The movement works with rural communities to foster healthy ecosystems by planting trees in critical watersheds. In doing so, the movement helps communities

address their needs for essential environmental services, such as water and fertile soil. You can find more information about the work of the Green Belt Movement and their activities [here](#).

Dr. Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement have been featured in many books and were the subject of the documentary film [Taking Root: the Vision of Wangari Maathai](#) (Marlboro Productions, 2008). In

the film she says, “It is the people who must save the environment. It is the people who must make their leaders change. And we cannot be intimidated. So we must stand up for what we believe in.” You can learn more about the film, and watch it [here](#).





Even in these dire circumstances, ordinary people have agency to confront the effects of climate change.

III. Strategies to Achieve Cooperation to Address Climate Change

A) DISCUSSION: The importance of cooperation in fighting climate change

The importance of cooperation in order to achieve desirable outcomes is a clear emergent subtext of *Thank You for the Rain*. Indeed, a key reason why the film itself has been so effective in delivering its message is that Julia and Kisilu worked together. Throughout the film, Kisilu's mission is all about organizing the community to plant trees that will combat the change in climate. In one scene of the film, Kisilu puzzles over how tiny social insects like ants are able to achieve enormous feats by working cooperatively (at time code 54:00–55:00).

- What other instances of cooperation can you identify in the film?
- In what ways could individuals, such as you, your friends, or schoolmates, work together to address the issue of climate change?
- What are the best ways in which countries and governments could work together to fight climate change?
- In what ways could people, governments, and businesses work together to fight climate change?

You can find information to help you answer these questions from the [David Suzuki Foundation](#) and [Cambridge University](#).

B) ACTIVITY: The impact of *Thank You for The Rain*

Julia Dahr, the director of this documentary, is described on the website of her company, [Differ Media](#), as “an enthusiastic filmmaker who loves meeting new people. ... Julia has big visions of what can be accomplished through film.” This raises the question of what impact the film has had. It turns out this film had, and continues to have, a substantial impact in Mutomo, in Kenya, and across the globe.

In this activity, I urge you to research the [impact](#) of this film as described on the film's website. Read the information provided slowly and carefully. Note that you can also follow recent actions inspired by the film on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). In addition, this film won a [2019 HI5](#), a [docimpact15](#) award that, each year, recognizes the achievements of five film projects and their impact campaigns. A report accompanying the award can be found [here](#). The impacts are remarkable and truly inspiring for those who aspire to create films that make a difference.