

My First Story: Why Copenhagen Was More Than Just a Trophy

By Hellen Mathuka | Chief Strategy & Innovation Officer, Kenya Airways

I just got back from Denmark, and I must say, the year has begun on a high note. One might have a different opinion, but winning three awards at the just-concluded SkyTeam Aviation Challenge (TAC) is something worth shouting about. This was our fourth year participating in the challenge, but this time, it felt different.

I still remember the day Wakina Mutembei, our Lead on Sustainability, walked into my office to brief me on this project. She didn't just have a plan; she had a sparkle in her eye that you couldn't ignore. Her ideas were bold, honestly, as I listened to her passion, I realized that was exactly what we needed. We didn't need "safe"; we needed to set the standard high.

It wasn't an easy journey to get here. For a long time, "sustainability" in aviation felt like a buzzword, something you did for a press release. But at Kenya Airways, we made a deliberate choice to shift that narrative. To us, sustainability is no longer just a "nice-to-have"; it is a strategic asset. It is core to our survival and our growth.

While the awards in Copenhagen celebrated our "Game Changer" status, the real victory happens every day on our ground operations in Nairobi, often when no one is watching. It's in the decision to electrify our ground service equipment.

By 2024, we had already converted 12% of our baggage handling vehicles to electric power. This isn't just about carbon charts; it's about the air our ramp agents breathe. By removing 264 tonnes of CO₂ from the apron every year, we are creating a healthier workspace for our staff while saving thousands of dollars in fuel and maintenance.

It's also in the hands of our cabin crew. When you see our crew collecting a tray, you might just see "service," in reality, it's a well-coordinated waste reduction system. By replacing plastic food packaging, cutlery, cups, and bottles with recyclable and biodegradable alternatives, our teams are now avoiding over 336 tonnes of single-use plastic every year across our flights.

That level of execution does not come from policy. It comes from training, belief, and culture.

We don't do this for the applause in Denmark (though the awards are nice!). We do it because it makes business sense. These initiatives have helped us save over KES 50 million annually. That is the definition of a strategic asset: doing good for the planet while strengthening our bottom line.

That said, I was incredibly proud to step onto that stage and bring home the Game Changer of the Year, Most Impactful Solution – Catering, and a Special Recognition for Collaboration with KLM. I also have to give a huge shoutout to our sister airline, Jambojet, for winning the Most Compelling Story award. It is inspiring to see the whole group moving together toward this future.

So, while I'm proud of the trophies, I'm prouder of the entire KQ team and partners who make sustainability a daily, deliberate reality.

