

Planting a Seedling for Better Decision-Making

When we started the Green Belt Movement some 30 years ago, Kenyan women identified the lack of water, fuelwood, and nutritious food as their major challenges. They were also concerned about the growing poverty they were experiencing in the communities. This was in preparation for the first meeting focusing on the status of women in the world that was to be held in Mexico in 1975. As I sat and listened to the women, it occurred to me that what we needed to do was heal the land. Why can't we plant trees? I thought. It was easy and doable. Trees would restore the land and produce fuel, fodder, or fruit. Planting trees could help break the cycle of deprivation and malnutrition. These were the beginnings of the Green Belt Movement.

Ever since, the Green Belt Movement has advocated for the protection of Kenya's environment. It has demonstrated time and again that there is a link between a healthy environment, good governance, and peace, and shown that they are the necessary precursors for sustainable development. Our environment, our economic prosperity, and our democratic systems are all inextricably linked. Where environmental destruction takes place, poverty is sure to follow. By contrast, a well-functioning environment—healthy soils and a vibrant wildlife sector—is the foundation of agriculture and tourism, the envisioned engines of Kenya's economic future. Through their function as water catchment areas, our forests deliver more than half of the electrical power generation capacity for our country and supply most of the water for our cities, our farms, and our wildlife areas.

Improving human well-being and safeguarding the environment from which Kenya derives so many benefits are now top priorities in national plans and strategies such as the *Economic Recovery Strategy* and the implementation plan for the Millennium Development Goals. The challenge is in implementing these plans—moving from words to concrete actions on the ground. But how do we build the knowledge base, reform institutions, and formulate policies to achieve these multiple development targets? How do we convince policymakers that investing in nature and environmental management will yield strong returns for poverty reduction and improve the livelihoods of Kenyans?

To manage our resources more wisely and more fairly, we have to base our decisions on knowledge and analysis rooted in sound science. I believe that to formulate better environmental management policies requires investing in a more comprehensive knowledge base on the state of the environment and of human well-being. It requires better information on the value and contributions of environmental services to livelihoods and the national economy. And it requires better understanding of the relationships between resource use and poverty.

Kenyan policymakers and Kenyan voters need to know:

- ▶ How does the location of poverty compare to the distribution of key environmental resources and services?
- ▶ Which areas provide critically important environmental services, and how do the supply areas for various services overlap?
- ▶ Who has access to environmental resources, and who benefits?
- ▶ Who bears the cost of environmental depletion and degradation?
- ▶ What is the impact of resource depletion on the economy and livelihoods?
- ▶ Where could we restore ecosystems and create economic opportunities?

Planting trees has been a way to break the cycle of diminishing resources for the women of the Green Belt Movement. I see the ideas and maps in this atlas to be much like a small seedling. If nurtured, if further developed and grown, and if used by both government and civil society, this seedling carries the promise of breaking the cycle of unenlightened decision-making—decision-making that takes environmental resources for granted; that ignores the deep poverty and hardships of people; that does not fairly disclose the cost and benefits of different choices; that is not accountable to the people most affected by economic or environmental changes; that does not consider the impact on our children and grandchildren.

It is for these reasons that I commend the production of *Nature's Benefits in Kenya: An Atlas of Ecosystems and Human Well-Being* and the contribution it can make to sound decision-making and good governance. As a result of this type of work, we will never be able to claim that we did not know. Rather, using this knowledge, we can move forward to protect our environment, provide economic opportunity for everyone, and build a strong democracy.

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