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# THE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTOR IN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

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TOM MSHINDI

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In May 1990 Nairobi hosted the International Conference on Global Warming and Climate Change: African Perspectives. The conference was an important landmark in the international search for solutions to a problem whose potentially catastrophic global consequences are greatly multiplied for Africa. In particular, Africa must find ways to manage the environment that will enable the present generation to realize accelerated economic development without denying future generations the capacity to enjoy the same. This has come to be referred to as sustainable development. Africa's dilemma lies in the fact that the continent lacks the scientific knowledge and environmentally sound technologies that could facilitate a transition from current environmentally hostile economic activities to more environmentally friendly ones.

## Environmental Degradation and Economic Crisis

At the top of the agenda of Africa's immediate concerns is the growing foreign debt, which at its current figure of \$135 billion equals the total GNP of all African countries or 3.5 times their annual export earnings. Other pressing issues include the receding share of the world commodity trade, falling prices for exports, the severe side effects of International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs, and the pressure of population growth on individual countries' resources and infrastructure. Africa's leaders and a well-informed fraction of the continent's rapidly expanding population have realized that environmental degradation has become the most alarming symptom of Africa's worsening economic and human crisis.

Certain food production figures provide a perspective on the enormity of Africa's economic paralysis and its link to environmental deterioration. The Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN organization responsible for monitoring the status of global food reserves and food production trends, explains that in the 1980s, while Africa's food production increased by 2 percent, its population (now estimated at 600 million) grew by 3 percent, effectively cancelling out any nutritional gains and ensuring instead a net loss of 1 percent. To meet this shortfall, the continent had to redirect its meager resources away from economically productive activities and import 20 percent of its food requirements. Even as population growth was nullifying any

potential improvement of Africans' well-being from increased food production, events on the environmental front compromised the possibility of Africa achieving further expansion of food production.

A combination of intensified pressure on land for human settlement and agriculture, uninformed agricultural production methods, overgrazing, and intense deforestation for firewood has raised the specter of the entire Sahelian belt turning into desert. Already the desert has spread in twenty-one African countries in the Sudano-Sahelian region, and fifteen in the Kalahari desert of southern Africa. In the Sahelian belt, Africa has lost 650,000 square kilometers (or 2.5 times the area of the state of Texas) of productive land to desert over the past fifty years. Each year the desert advances between eighteen and forty kilometers, claiming some 50,000 to 70,000 square kilometers of arable land, an area equivalent to the state of Maine.

Throughout the continent, poverty's vicious circle of falling production—reduced income—no savings—low investment—decreased returns—falling production results in the exploitation of forest resources either for export or to satisfy the ever-growing demand for domestic firewood. The great cash shortage limits the ability of African nations to participate in global environmental protection campaigns and dampens local enthusiasm for conservation efforts.

### Initiatives for Environmental Protection

Fortunately, however, numerous examples of successful local, national, and regional initiatives have raised environmental consciousness and encouraged prudent use of natural resources. Kenya's Green Belt Movement offers an example of such local initiative. The brainchild of Kenya's first female professor, Wangari Maathai, the movement started as a humble experiment in tree-planting on small plots in Kenya's densely-populated Central Province. Its success soon expanded the Greenbelt Movement to nationwide proportions. Now a national secretariat, decentralized at the provincial and district levels, provides seedlings to women's groups who plant and tend the trees. The program has become one of the best examples of how environmental protection can be organized at the grass roots level—in particular by involving women. The movement currently boasts of having planted over one million grown trees and hundreds of thousands of seedlings. Through this initiative, women obtain firewood and make money through prudent cutting and selling. Most importantly, however, they always replant. For her efforts Professor Maathai has been awarded the United Nations Environment Program's Global 500 Prize, joining other African prizewinners who have significantly raised local awareness about the need to protect the environment. A notable winner last year was Michael Odula, a school teacher who manages a number of tree nurseries on a tiny island in Lake Victoria. His goal is to educate the public by practice—one of many initiatives giving hope for the future.

Also heartening is the positive spirit with which most African governments have reacted to calls to protect the environment. Forty-one countries attended

the 1985 Cairo meeting on environmental policy in Africa, and most governments have since prepared national papers on their environments. The Cairo meeting produced status reports on the seas, desert and arid lands, river and lake basins, and forests. The meeting also resulted in the Cairo Programme of Action and the establishment of the African Ministerial Council on the Environment (AMCEN). AMCEN's third follow-up meeting in Nairobi in 1989 consisted mainly of sharing information and preparing documents. Subsequently, however, policy implementation has been less than satisfactory with respect to capital and, in some instances, commitment from specific states.

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Kenya has been fairly successful in its efforts to protect the environment, and discussions of the issue are now widespread in the country. Government initiatives have taken the form of specific policies on the environment, repeated references to environmental issues at public meetings, and initiatives to reverse the effects of environmental abuse. Hence activities like National Tree Planting Day are taken seriously in Kenya, as are communal efforts to arrest soil erosion. The latter have been particularly successful in the arid districts of Machakos and Kitui to the south of Nairobi, and Baringo in the north-central section of the country. In addition, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources actively coordinates tree-planting, forest and water resource conservation, and soil erosion prevention. A specific example of environmental policy enforcement is that Kenya has outlawed felling trees without prior notification to the authorities. Kenya's government is willing to do more, but financial constraints, not to mention other socioeconomic factors, limit its efforts. Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Egypt are moving in a similar direction.

### Regional Environmental Problems

Evidence of crucial regional-level recognition that environmental degradation is a trans-boundary problem includes the establishment of organizations like the Inter-Governmental Authority on Deserts and Drylands (IGADD), that unites the East African countries of Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia. Founded in 1985 as a response to the threat of the desertification that already has claimed a large swath of these countries' productive land, IGADD plots the advance of the desert and recommends practical measures to halt desertification. It is also responsible for monitoring potential droughts and providing early warning to threatened countries.

Another significant aspect of Africa's environmental plight is rural-urban migration, triggered by rural dwellers' diminishing land holdings, insignificant returns from agricultural production, and poor soil fertility. The migrants, mainly young and able-bodied secondary school graduates, flock to the city only to encounter the cruel reality of a stagnant economy and tight job market.

Unable to find employment, they join the "informal sector"—working as newspaper vendors, shoeshine boys and girls, hawkers of food products and assorted commodities, car washers—or take up crime. Unable to afford decent shelter, they turn to the only alternative, slum dwellings. Slum areas consist mainly of precariously constructed shacks of either sackcloth, canvas, or cardboard, and lack sewerage and running water. Open spaces between the hovels usually become dumping grounds for refuse or toilets for the slum dwellers. About a half of Nairobi's 1.8 million people live in unbelievable squalor in the ever-expanding slums. Similarly, in Cairo and Lagos over 50 percent of the population lives in crowded slums.

Even as Africa tries to come to grips with its unique and most urgent environmental problem—the danger of losing the most productive land to the encroaching desert—it is forced to take cognizance of other global environmental concerns, such as the threat of global warming and damage to the ozone layer. Information on such issues is only now trickling into Africa, and still is accessible to few Africans. The climatic change that is expected to result from the greenhouse effect (the melting of polar ice caps and rise in sea level) will have far-reaching effects on the world and a profound impact on Africa—not least because of the continent's reliance on agriculture. Therefore, while many Africans may not consider global warming a pressing problem, environmental experts recognize that African participation in the global effort to mitigate the effects of climate change must be as vigorous and intense as that of other continents. As G.O.P. Obasi of the Geneva-based World Meteorological Organization explained during the May 1990 Nairobi climate change conference: "Africa's contribution to the war against greenhouse gas warming does not have to wait until the framework convention on climate change has been adopted and signed. We can make a critical examination of some of our activities and identify those areas where a contribution can be made."

Admittedly, there is little Africa can do at present about chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) emissions since the offenders—mainly the refrigeration industry—are predominantly in the industrialized countries. Nevertheless, some forty-five African countries have signed the Montreal Protocol to the Convention on the Protection of the Ozone Layer, calling upon industries that emit CFCs to seek alternatives that do not damage the ozone. The African nations' participation in the Montreal Convention serves as a gesture of willingness to involve itself actively in the global movement to prevent or mitigate global warming. For the simple reason that most of its citizens do not understand the enormity of this problem, Africa's leaders must channel resources into the crucial task of information dissemination. As Obasi said in Nairobi when he called for African

participation in negotiations for a framework convention on climate change, "Africa must negotiate with knowledge."

Thus far, IGADD has compiled a reference book on land-use patterns and the extent of desertification in specific countries. However, the organization's ability to do much more has been hampered by internal conflicts in Uganda, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan—all of which draw attention and resources away from environmental issues. Ultimately, efforts of individual African governments to protect the environment may be threatened most seriously by the failure of these various governments to act in concert.

### Regional Cooperation

On one issue, however, African governments have acted with a rare level of cooperation. They have refused to be cajoled into signing an international accord allowing cross-border transportation of toxic substances, including radioactive waste from nuclear plants. Alarmed by revelations that such toxins had been exported to a number of West African countries, including Nigeria, Benin, and Guinea Bissau, African governments refused to sign the 1989 Basel Protocol. They rejected it because it only required that the exporting country obtain prior informed consent before exporting the toxins. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has drafted an alternative for presentation to the United Nations. The OAU's draft states in more detail the safeguards that it expects to see for Africa in a final agreement.

To counterbalance the disregard for environmental issues displayed by some African governments, laudable efforts are being carried out under the aegis of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The most remarkable of these is the Nairobi-based Non-Governmental Environmental Organization (ANEN). ANEN serves as an umbrella organization, coordinating activities of the NGOs of individual countries and channeling funds to support environmental activities of these groups. The organization has achieved success both in its concrete projects to halt environmental degradation and in its efforts to increase community awareness in the immediate vicinity of the projects. Information gathered from field activities and research has been published and disseminated in other countries and regions. Kenya's most noteworthy NGO is the Kenya Environmental Non-Governmental Organization, which has compiled a list of indigenous tree species in Kenya and cooperated on a project resulting in a highly acclaimed energy-efficient stove.

By African standards, Kenya has a relatively literate population, a dynamic economy, and a vigorous press. As a result, it may not be indicative of trends throughout Africa. For precisely these reasons, however, Kenya serves as a good example of what can be achieved on the environmental front if extraneous factors such as endemic political crises and civil wars are removed.

### Conclusion

Even a cursory survey such as this makes it clear that in Africa there is no shortage of support for environmental protection. Stability, peace, and an

enabling economic environment would greatly further Africa's involvement in the crusade to save the natural environment. It is in creating a conducive economic environment that the rich industrial countries can be of most assistance. The comment of the late Premier Indira Gandhi that "poverty is the worst polluter" accurately describes Africa's plight. As long as African populations live at or below the poverty line, no message concerning the need to save the environment will penetrate their consciousness and change the way they relate to the environment.

Therefore, before Africa can create a dynamic and productive economy it must obtain relief from the incredible burden of foreign debt. Africans have stressed this point at every international forum on economic development and the environment. They argue that the industrialized West bears at least partial responsibility for Africa's situation because its colonial policies sowed the seeds of the continent's environmental degradation. In addition to writing off African debt, industrialized nations must inject funds and transfer technical information to Africa in order to ensure the development of adequate local expertise on environmental problems. This is the only way to encourage internal, structural, and institutional adjustments and promote sustainable development in African countries.

To assert that merely changing leadership styles would promote appropriate development is like insisting that a cripple should rise and walk without the assistance of crutches. If Africa is crippled, it is still too early to rule out a cure. If the affluent world truly believes that all countries have a common future, it must heed Africa's cries of distress.

