

Trees for Democracy

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WHEN I was growing up in Nyeri in central Kenya, there was no word for desert in my mother tongue, Kikuyu. Our land was fertile and forested. But today in Nyeri, as in much of Africa and the developing world, water sources have dried up, the soil is parched and unsuitable for growing food, and conflicts over land are common. So it should come as no surprise that I was inspired to plant trees to help meet the basic needs of rural women. As a member of the National Council of Women of Kenya in the early 1970's, I listened as women related what they wanted but did not have enough of: energy, clean drinking water and nutritious food.

My response was to begin planting trees with them, to help heal the land and break the cycle of poverty. Trees stop soil erosion, leading to water conservation and increased rainfall. Trees provide fuel, material for building and fencing, fruits, fodder, shade and beauty. As household managers in rural and urban areas of the developing world, women are the first to encounter the effects of ecological stress. It forces them to walk farther to get wood for cooking and heating, to search for clean water and to find new sources of food as old ones disappear.

My idea evolved into the Green Belt Movement, made up of thousands of groups, primarily of women, who have planted 30 million trees across Kenya. The women are paid a small amount for each seedling they grow, giving them an income as well as improving their environment. The movement has spread to countries in East and Central Africa.

Through this work, I came to see that environmental degradation by poor communities was both a source of their problems and a symptom. Growing crops on steep mountain slopes leads to loss of topsoil and land deterioration. Similarly, deforestation causes rivers to dry up and rainfall patterns to shift, which, in turn, result in much lower crop yields and less land for grazing.

In the 1970's and 1980's, as I was encouraging farmers to plant trees on their land, I also discovered that corrupt government agents were responsible for much of the deforestation by illegally selling off land and trees to well-connected developers. In the early 1990's, the livelihoods, the rights and even the lives of many Kenyans in the Rift Valley were lost when elements of President Daniel arap Moi's government encouraged ethnic communities to attack one another over land. Supporters of the ruling party got the land, while those in the pro-democracy movement were displaced. This was one of the government's ways of retaining power; if communities were kept busy fighting over land, they would have less opportunity to demand democracy.

Land issues in Kenya are complex and easily exploited by politicians. Communities needed to understand and be sensitized about the history of land ownership and distribution in Kenya and Africa. We held seminars on human rights, governing and reducing conflict.

In time, the Green Belt Movement became a leading advocate of reintroducing multiparty democracy and free and fair elections in Kenya. Through public education, political advocacy

and protests, we also sought to protect open spaces and forests from unscrupulous developers, who were often working hand in hand with politicians, through public education, political advocacy and protests. Mr. Moi's government strongly opposed advocates for democracy and environmental rights; harassment, beatings, death threats and jail time followed, for me and for many others.

Fortunately, in 2002, Kenyans realized their dream and elected a democratic government. What we've learned in Kenya - the symbiotic relationship between the sustainable management of natural resources and democratic governance - is also relevant globally.

Indeed, many local and international wars, like those in West and Central Africa and the Middle East, continue to be fought over resources. In the process, human rights, democracy and democratic space are denied.

I believe the Nobel Committee recognized the links between the environment, democracy and peace and sought to bring them to worldwide attention with the Peace Prize that I am accepting today. The committee, I believe, is seeking to encourage community efforts to restore the earth at a time when we face the ecological crises of deforestation, desertification, water scarcity and a lack of biological diversity.

Unless we properly manage resources like forests, water, land, minerals and oil, we will not win the fight against poverty. And there will not be peace. Old conflicts will rage on and new resource wars will erupt unless we change the path we are on.

To celebrate this award, and the work it recognizes of those around the world, let me recall the words of Gandhi: My life is my message. Also, plant a tree.

Wangari Maathai, the 2004 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, is Kenya's assistant minister for environment and natural resources and the founder of the Green Belt Movement.