

Editorial

Africa Environment Day 2010

Wednesday, March 3rd 2010 was celebrated as the 8th *Africa Environment Day* (AED) in accord with the decision made in July, 2001 by the Africa Union (CM/Dec.685 (LXXVI)) that all member States commemorate March 3rd annually to celebrate the diversity of issues at the nexus of human development and the environment¹. The theme for this year's reflection headquartered in Tanzania is "*African Resilience to Climate Change: Biodiversity Conservation and Enhancing Traditional Knowledge*." In 2009, the theme was "*Greening Africa*" when Senegal hosted the events and focused on advancing the Great Green Wall initiative that spans eleven countries across the Sahel-Sahara axis². And in Addis Ababa in 2008, Dr. Stike Mkandla, the United Nations Environment Programme's representative to the African Union admonished that "it is time to get our hands dirty in steps to deal with threats like climate change that face our continent and our communities."³

Climate change has dominated the AED agenda since its inception, as well as most other environmental management and advocacy events throughout the past decade. The dominance of climate change issues in Africa is due in part to its alignment with the international framing of "global warming," and the arrogation of international resources to mitigate the root causes of climate change and to support vulnerable populations. But at what cost to other pressing environmental concerns that contribute most to the burden of disease in many African countries? There should be no cost. In fact, several environmental problems can benefit if we conscientiously address concerns about climate change because of the interdependence of domains such as water resources, biodiversity, soil quality and land-use, reforestation, and energy resources. All these issues warrant undivided attention, and they are all affected by climate. Moreover, they all have important repercussions for human development at the local and regional levels regardless of the outcome of international negotiations to tackle climate change at the local level.

Without progress on the climate change agenda at the global level, repetition of this theme annually in the AED program makes the speeches sound like a broken record, treading and re-treading worn groves until it becomes painful to listen. At this year's AED celebration hosted by the government of the United Republic of Tanzania in gateway city of Arusha, the speeches were given by luminaries such as the Mr. Michel Jarraud, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Association, Mr. Ahmed Djoghla, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and Mr. Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. Here is an excerpt of Mr. Jarraud's statement:

"I wish to congratulate the United Republic of Tanzania for hosting this key event and for enhancing climate awareness. In 2000, UN Members adopted the Millennium Declaration as a renewed commitment to human development, including the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with quantified targets and indicators for actions to improve the livelihood of impoverished sectors. However, climate change impacts will tend to offset progress being made to meet the MDGs by 2015, particularly in the areas of food security, water resources management and human health. If humanity were unable to reach a propitious agreement, climate change has the potential to overwhelm our adaptive capacities within the coming decades. However, it is encouraging to note that key stakeholders have recognized the urgency of addressing the climate change issue which WMO has been announcing with mounting concern since 1976. WMO perceives this juncture as an opportunity to advance in sustainable development and international cooperation. Some changes are unavoidable, but it is not too late to prevent them from becoming an even more serious threat to our common future."⁴

WMO has been raising concerns about climate change for more than a quarter of a century. Yet, the year 2009 was probably one of the top five warmest years on record, and the decade 2000 – 2009 was the warmest period recorded. Perhaps the change in climate is unavoidable, but there are many other environmental disasters that we can avoid in Africa. We should get our hands dirty on these.

¹ Africa Union. Press Release N°25/2010, 3rd March: Commemoration of Eighth Africa Environment Day. www.africa-union.org.

² Africa Press Organization. 2009. <http://appblog.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/africa-environment-day-greening-africa/>

³ http://www.africa-union.org/root/AU/Conferences/2008/march/3/sp_unep.pdf

⁴ http://www.wmo.int/pages/mediacentre/statann/documents/Tanzania_V.5.pdf