

Challenge for Africa

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I am very happy to share my ideas of the challenges Africa faces especially with respect to the environment. As many of us in Africa know, we have two huge deserts on the continent; to the north, the Sahara; to the southwest, the Kalahari. Of great concern is that the two are racing towards each other at great speed due to the destruction of vegetation, loss of topsoil, and deforestation. Separating them is the Congo forest ecosystem, the second largest in the world after the Amazon. Together, these ecosystems—along with the tropical forests of Southeast Asia and the

boreal forests of northern Canada and Russia—regulate the world's climate and reduce global warming. Scientists tell us that 20% of greenhouse gases come from deforestation and degradation. It is in order to try to protect this huge forest ecosystem in the middle of Africa, not only for the people of that region but for the entire globe, that I am the Goodwill Ambassador of the Congo forest.

I know that the United Nations (UN), in order to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) number 7, environmental sustainability, is working closely with Japan, France and Norway on a process that will ensure we protect these forests that continue to provide environmental services, one of which—biodiversity—is especially important in light of the recent COP 10 to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Nagoya, and the fact that some of the most important flora and fauna yet to be studied reside in equatorial forests [United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Millennium Development Goals. Available at <http://www.undp.org/mdg>].

Now, we know that these forests are not being destroyed by many of the underdeveloped people who often reside in them. We know many of these forests are being exploited by the developed world, which has a great responsibility to assist governments in these regions to protect forests. And you cannot do this without addressing underdevelopment.

So I do hope, in looking ahead to the challenges of Africa, many heads of states will tell you that the greatest challenge they face is poverty and underdevelopment, that is why supporting REDD is so important to ensure a more peaceful, sustainable world (Angelsen et al. 2009).

We know Africa has many conflicts fueled by the competition for resources. We fight over land, water, the possibility of sustaining decent livelihoods. We want people to understand there is a very direct link between the way we manage our resources and peace. If we manage

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responsibly, with accountability for our decisions, if we promote human rights and justice, we are more likely to pre-empt many of the reasons why we fight. We would like to see governments in conflict regions being assisted to focus on development and reducing poverty—which is what Africans need, not guns and bullets.

But before I continue I want to acknowledge a very special class of people in Africa, these are the African elites. You and I, who have had the privilege of education and exposure, understand that African people need to be protected from exploitation. There is a paradox in Africa that you have one of the richest continents in the world, yet its people are among the poorest. That should not be acceptable to the rest of the world, and it certainly should not be acceptable to the ruling African elites. We have a special responsibility to protect our people from exploitation, to protect the resources that are in Africa, God given, and to make sure we do not allow ourselves to continue being the continent that provides raw materials to the rest of the world at a price we do not set, then buys the goods produced from the developed world at a price we can barely afford. That is economic injustice, and we would want it to be put on the table, to be fair and just. Many governments see that when they visit the African continent, and those of us who live here see it every day. With the UN, governments, and development agencies working together, Africa can be a truly wonderful place for our people.

The rest of the Millennium Development Goals will be much more difficult to realize in Africa, unless you can address MDG number 1, which is ending poverty and hunger. But let's be honest, if we really took the MDGs seriously, if we were able, especially through the partnership at the African Union level to remove all the wars we have in Africa, we would be able to focus on the real issues that affect our people. But that is an issue for politicians and the African Union. We will not realize the MDGs if we do not prioritize them the way we prioritize our unsustainable lifestyles, wars and conflict and, indeed, governance systems that do not prioritize the basic needs and

rights of the African people. If at the African Union level our leaders were able to really work and focus on building regional political and economic blocks that could reduce conflicts and crippling competition, succeed in bringing economic development, creating real wealth for the people and bringing at least regional peace to Africa, then we would utilize our resources to realize the MDGs, especially the first one. The Asian region has been particularly good at realizing the second MDG—education—by investing in education, technology transfer, in transferring skills, in protecting young people especially from intoxicating drugs, and supporting people to use their energies for development. As a result this region has pulled its people out of MDG number 1. In the meantime, Africa has been left behind in many of the MDGs. That is partly because these MDGs are closely linked. That so many of our young people have been lost to wars and their ramifications, drugs and unemployment is completely inexcusable. It points to the issue of leadership that I emphasize in my book *The Challenge for Africa* (Maathai 2009). Without a caring political leadership Africa cannot move to achieve the MDGs—you and I as ordinary citizens know what should be done, but it is the leaders who must create the political leadership and conducive environment that would unleash the energy of the African people to participate in development and wealth creation and thereby achieve the MDGs. The African leadership must decide that Africa will not continue being one of the poorest regions in the world, when it is indeed one of the richest in resources. This is the challenge for Africa.

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