

## Chapter 10

### Carbon justice and forestation – the African perspective

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#### Wangari Maathai



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Wangari Muta Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya, in 1940, the daughter of farmers in the highlands of Mount Kenya. The first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree, she subsequently became an associate Professor of Veterinary Anatomy in 1977 at the University of Nairobi. In the same year, she founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots environmental organization which has assisted women and their families in planting more than 40 million trees across Kenya to protect the environment and promote sustainable livelihoods. Since that time, Wangari Maathai has campaigned tirelessly for democracy, human rights and environmental conservation. She played a key role in the campaign to cancel debt in Africa, and has fought for the protection of public forests. In 2004, Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, recognizing that for peace to be maintained there needs to be sustainable and equitable distribution of resources.

*Note:* This chapter is a commentary on chapter 9.

Climate stabilization will require that developing nations adopt a carbon-neutral energy system, and have robust adaptation plans. However, many developing nations today lack the financial resources to embrace climate-friendly technologies and protect their people from the impacts of climate change. It should therefore stand to reason that developed countries, which bear the greatest responsibility for past greenhouse gas emissions, must be the first to take action on climate change, and support the Global South in this process. As described by Sunita Narain, it is indeed the responsibility of industrialized countries to help developing countries start the transition towards green technologies. At the same time, all developing regions, including Africa, need to focus on the options that are available to them right now.

Although Africa has so far contributed little to global warming, as a region it will be one of the hardest hit by climate change. Many parts of Africa are already seeing the effects of climate change that science describes. The ice and snow on Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya are melting rapidly. Many of the rivers that flow from these mountains have either run dry or the volume of water has been greatly reduced. Droughts are prolonged and rains are coming at the wrong times. Poor land use practices are contributing to the expansion of African deserts – such as the Sahara in the north and the Kalahari in the south – as well as to forest and land degradation across the whole continent. As most Africans rely on the primary resources of their environment for their livelihoods (soil and land to grow food crops, water from rivers for domestic use, and forests for fuel and fodder), these changes greatly affect the livelihoods of the African people.

According to the most recent assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, deforestation and forest degradation account for up to 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The loss of healthy, stable forests therefore represents a significant factor in anthropogenic global warming. As in many parts of the world, deforestation is an issue of major concern in Africa. In Kenya, for example, the proportion of national territory covered by forest has been reduced from an original cover of about 30% to less than 2%. The UN recommends Kenya have at least 10% of its land under forestry to deliver essential ecosystem services such as water and climate control. Reforestation programmes, combined with the protection of standing forests, riverine systems and wetlands, are one of the many ways in which Africa can help face the huge challenge of climate change. By planting an appropriate number of trees, and protecting those that are already there, developing countries can help nature to regulate global temperatures.

It was in this spirit that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP),<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unep.org>

together with the organization which I founded, the Green Belt Movement,<sup>2</sup> and several other partners worldwide, including the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), launched the Billion Tree Campaign.<sup>3</sup> As well as encouraging the planting of trees and taking action particularly at the individual level, this project, which has received a tremendous response across the world, aims to educate people about the very serious environmental risks humanity is facing.

In many developing countries we have found that environmental concerns are sidelined by other seemingly more urgent issues. However, we cannot survive without clean drinking water, food, and clean air. Environmental concerns are not a luxurious indulgence in Africa. When rivers dry up and soil erosion takes place, the land loses its fertility and the people who rely on the land for food and fuel lose their source of livelihood. These are some of the issues that governments in developing countries should stress in order to raise awareness among their own people, to highlight the serious risks the planet is facing, and to mobilize participation to tackle these challenges.

Forests play a major role as carbon sinks. We all have a moral duty to assist people and governments to rehabilitate and protect standing trees and vegetation. We need incentives in forestry to ensure indigenous forests are restored to promote the essential ecosystem services they deliver. Of course, financial mechanisms – both national and international – rely on principles that ensure accountability and responsible utilization of resources. However, excessive bureaucracy may block funds from reaching those who need them most. This especially concerns local communities and indigenous peoples who will need to both adapt to and mitigate climate change at grassroots level. Lack of access to financial resources and information constitute considerable barriers for pursuing the issues of justice, rights to sustainable development, and equity.

In addition to intensified reforestation efforts, existing forests must be protected. The Congo forest ecosystem, along with the Amazon and the forests of Southeast Asia can make an enormous contribution to sequestering carbon. It is therefore important to support countries that are willing to preserve their forests and which do not encourage logging. Initiatives such as the Congo Basin Forest Fund,<sup>4</sup> of which I am co-chair, are extremely valuable in this effort. The Fund aims to develop the capacity of the people and institutions of this region to manage their own forests, help local communities find livelihoods that are consistent with forest conservation, and reduce deforestation. Hopefully, such initiatives will contribute to a collective partnership with many of the countries that want to support forest-rich regions to retain these ecosystems, ensuring that they continue to contribute not

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cbf-fund.org>

only to carbon sequestration but also to the protection of biodiversity, the water cycle, and the global climate.

Another decisive factor in climate protection is climate justice: A large number of countries will be negatively impacted by climate change even though they have contributed little or nothing to the problem. Accelerating climate change is leaving little room for developing countries to increase their emissions as part of their struggle to overcome endemic poverty. These issues need to be addressed so that the discussion does not revolve only around the question of who is responsible but also includes what is a fair and just response to climate change.

Sunita Narain has described various mechanisms that can help to finance zero-carbon technologies in developing countries, based on a just allocation of emission allowances among all people of the world. The transfer of financial resources to developing countries, helping us to leapfrog to zero-carbon technologies will be needed. However, any initiatives developed will require careful checks and balances to ensure energy consumption is capped in developed countries. Extensive reduction in carbon emissions needs to be achieved in developed countries before any carbon burden is shared through a fair and equitable mechanism with developing countries. Such a mechanism will necessarily include significant financial transfers from developed to developing countries, and if this is structured correctly, new funds for protecting forests in the developing world could be generated. However many approaches that have been used to prevent deforestation have failed in the past. Innovative forest protection schemes – an emergency fund for forests and an initiative to reduce emissions from forest degradation and deforestation (REDD) – offer promising new opportunities to conserve and restore our forests.

Countries in Africa could certainly benefit from such schemes – primarily, because they support initiatives that do not require extensive funds or heavy technology, but rather the mobilization of citizens to do the work, such as planting trees. The experience gained in the Green Belt Movement during the past thirty years shows that it is possible to mobilize millions of individual citizens in every country to plant trees, prevent soil loss, harvest rain water, and practice less destructive forms of agriculture. It is important to educate citizens about the need to protect trees, especially indigenous mountain forests, which are sources of water and biological diversity. Through the Green Belt Movement we have learned that when local communities understand the link between trees and their own livelihoods they are more likely to protect them.

Many simple actions can be taken all over the world to change our consumption patterns now. Individuals can choose to reduce, reuse, and recycle wherever they live. Many people are opting for hybrid cars, public transportation, and alternative sources of energy. The Green Belt Movement in Kenya is encouraging people to plant trees to create a sustainable future. These trees serve both as carbon sinks and

biodiversity reservoirs, thereby also making people aware of the linkages between poverty and the environment. While political leadership is important, it is also essential to mobilize citizens. In the end, it will be citizens who move their governments to more tangible commitments. We know what needs to be done to address climate change, and now is the time to do it.