

INFORMAL INTERACTIVE HEARINGS OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK, 23-24 JUNE 2005

Address by

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In the words of the 2004 Nobel Prize for Environment winner, Wangari Maathai, *“there can be no peace without equitable development; and there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment.”*

I stand before you today, representing eight international conservation organisations: BirdLife International, Conservation International, Fauna and Flora International, IUCN, The Nature Conservancy, Wetlands International, Wildlife Conservation Society and WWF, who firmly believe in this statement.

I speak as an African who has experienced rural life in Africa.

As a child, I grew up in a small village in Ghana. Life was what you would describe as “totally self sufficient” - nature provided all our basic needs. Men hunted and women fished, wild animals and freshwater fish provided protein, snails and mushrooms added variety to our diet, forest fruits were delicacies, we gathered non-timber forest products for the house and also for sale to supplement farm income, streams on the outskirts of the village provided clear water all year round. One could argue that we were not poor because the soil was rich, the stream water was clear, the forest was extensive and teeming with wildlife and the rivers teemed with fish. Today, the forest is gone, including the sacred riverine forests; the streams have dried up leaving muddy pools and no alternative sources of water have been provided; all big and medium sized game have disappeared, the land is badly degraded, agricultural productivity is low, leaving the village people much poorer today than when I was a child!

This situation is not unique. In the name of development, natural resources and environment are destroyed and rural communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America who already were poor, are driven into abject poverty. The Millennium Development Goals, which aim to eradicate poverty, are therefore an excellent and most welcome initiative.

We in the environment and conservation movement know that poverty and environment are inescapably linked – you cannot fix poverty in the long term unless you have a healthy environment. We are concerned, therefore, that despite the Secretary General’s



repeated statements to the effect that “*efforts to defeat poverty and pursue sustainable development will be in vain if environmental degradation and natural resource depletion continue unabated,*” the MDG process, at this stage, does not adequately reflect the importance of healthy ecosystems – the basic unit at which the environment can be managed. MDG 7 is the only goal which directly links to environmental issues, and shamefully, it is the goal where governments of the world, collectively, are not measuring up. The MDGs are interconnected and can neither be achieved in isolation, nor sequentially, and failure to invest adequately in MDG7 will accelerate degradation of the essential ecosystem services upon which the other MDGs depend. Ultimately, this will undermine our ability to achieve the MDGs.

The NGO conservation community fully appreciates this, and we are re-aligning our programmes to take account of this intimate link between environment and development, and ensure that our activities in developing countries are pro-poor, empower rural communities and open new opportunities to increase income and assets.

We therefore call on the Millennium Review Summit to:

1. Fully recognise that the MDGs are interrelated and interdependent, and appreciate that MDG7 underpins all the other MDGs and cannot be ignored.
2. Ensure that environmental sustainability is mainstreamed into national development and poverty reduction planning frameworks.
3. Recognize the contributions of ecosystem services to household and national economies, integrate environmental degradation costs into development programmes; and commit to developing and using better tools for measuring these.
4. Re-commit to achieving the 0.7% ODA target of donor governments, to do so more rapidly, and commit to invest a proportionately larger share of new ODA flows to achieving environmental sustainability.
5. Promote coherence among local, regional and national frameworks so that local level, pro-poor, pro-environment initiatives find supportive regional and national level policies.
6. Secure access for the rural poor to natural resources by clarifying rights and responsibilities for natural resource management.
7. Acknowledge and improve the role of rural communities as stewards of rural environments and provide compensation through payment for environmental services.

In conclusion, my experience tells me that environmental degradation can and will jeopardize the livelihoods and well-being of the rich and poor alike. But the rich have the means to cushion the impacts, while the poor have to bear the full brunt, and either perish or subsist in miserable conditions, with woefully inadequate basic necessities of life. The MDG process must strengthen and restore the environment and natural resources for the benefit of all, particularly the world's poor..