

Philip Osano, Kenya. A project descriptive essay which speaks to Principle 12 on honoring and supporting young people

Shaping Our Common Future: Youth Campaigning for Sustainable Development Using the Earth Charter in East Africa



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with young people since 2001. He holds a bachelors degree in Environmental Science from Egerton University in Kenya, and a masters degree in conservation biology from the University of Cape Town in South Africa. He was recently awarded first prize at a global Student Conference on Conservation Science at Cambridge University in England. He served as a member of the African Civil Society and the Government of Kenya Steering Committees for the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.
Earth Charter, Principle 12.c

In the wake of the preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in August/September 2002, hundreds of young people in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania were involved in a campaign for a more sustainable world, using the Earth Charter as a tool to lobby their respective governments and other interest groups. This dynamic group of young people were brought together to express their hopes for a better future under the Earth Charter inspired project

“Shaping Our Common Future.”¹ The project aimed to provide young people with a platform to actively and substantively participate in the review of Agenda 21² and to share a broad and long-term view of the levels of development by identifying strategies for tackling sustainable development challenges in East Africa.

The project involved youth organizations and umbrella groups working at local, provincial, and national levels within different areas of environment, society, culture, economy, and technology, and with different foci of education, advocacy, lobbying, and policy. Through meetings and discussion forums, young people shared perspectives and insights on past and present initiatives for sustainable development in the three East African countries; and, they promoted new initiatives to provide the public with information on some of the pressing challenges facing the planet and humanity today.

The project basis stemmed from past declarations and commitments to empower young people to participate fully in shaping the development of societies at the local and global levels; and, therefore, took into consideration the following documents in its formulation: Agenda 21 (specifically Chapter 25) (1992); the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (1995); The Lisbon Declaration (1998); The Braga Youth Action Plan (1999); and The Earth Charter (2000).

The marginalization of young people in decision-making in the East African countries has been exacerbated by lack of empowerment and the exclusive nature of the socio-political institutions of political parties, non governmental organizations, and religious and cultural associations. The WSSD process, therefore, provided a platform to mainstream youth issues and involvement at the core of planning, education, and participation using the Earth Charter as a framework for mobilizing and developing joint strategies for the youth in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Prior to undertaking activities targeted at promoting participatory involvement of young people in policy formulation and decision-making at the Johannesburg Summit in South Africa, there were open and extensive consultations with youth associations in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to identify critical priorities for achieving sustainable development in East Africa. Some of the highlights included The Earth Charter: Unfinished Agenda; youth policy; participation and rights; poverty and food security; health (especially the HIV/AIDS pandemic); human settlements; forest loss; climate change; water management; biodiversity loss; and legal instruments (international conventions, protocols, and agreements) on sustainable development.

In order to address the above issues, and to develop lobbying strategies for promoting the involvement of young people in the sustainable development reviews, several activities were under-

taken as part of the project. These included a high-profile East African Youth Conference and Training Seminar in March 2002 that brought together over forty delegates from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania; year-round discussions and actions on sustainable development by young people in schools and other institutions; research on youth involvement in sustainable development in Kenya; a national, student essay contest on sustainable development in Kenya to raise the public profile of the Earth Summit preparations; and radio programmes involving interviews with young people as part of publicity and awareness campaigns using the media.

In Kenya, the “Our Common Future” Project coordinated a national, student essay contest involving schools and colleges that gave students a chance to express their perspectives on what needs to be done to ensure sustainable development is achieved in the country. The main objectives of the essay contest were to sensitise and create awareness about the World Summit on Sustainable Development process amongst students and to act as an avenue through which young people can air their views on matters relating to sustainable development in Kenya. Over 2500 entries were received and judged by a panel of judges from Egerton University, Kenyatta University, Nairobi University, and the Kenya NGO Earth Summit 2002 Forum. Key themes that dominated the essay submissions, included, *inter alia*, the use of education as a vehicle for achieving a more sustainable future; cross cultural and religious tolerance; commitment to peace and non-violence; a need for a values framework to guide present and future societies; and, promotion of human rights, with an emphasis on inter-generational equity in the use of earth resources. These themes prominently echo some of the key principles embodied in the Earth Charter. On 17 May 2002, essay winners were awarded prizes at a glittering ceremony presided over by the deputy leader of the official opposition, later

Vice-President of Kenya, the late Hon. Michael Kijana Wamalwa.

The East African Youth Conference was held from 15-18 March 2002 in the Rift Valley town of Naivasha, Kenya. The conference brought together over forty youth leaders from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to chart the youth position on sustainable development priorities in the sub-region level and to draft a joint statement for WSSD. In the “Naivasha Declaration,” the delegates endorsed the Earth Charter and further affirmed their commitment to lobby their respective governments to endorse the Earth Charter and to promote the Charter in other international youth forums on sustainable development, especially the UNEP Global Youth Forum 2002 in Denmark³. The conference also included cultural and practical exhibitions from youth organizations, a training session on advocacy and campaigning conducted by the members of the Kenya NGO Earth Summit 2002 Forum, keynote speeches from government figures, and youth discussion platforms for exchanging ideas and promoting networking.

The outcomes from the “Our Common Future” project were disseminated in major global events, including UNEP Global Youth Forum in March 2002 in Denmark; WSSD Prep COM IV in May 2002 in Indonesia; and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in August/September 2002 in South Africa. One of the critical factors for the success of the project was the use of the strong network structure already established by the governments of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, and the NGOs in East Africa, to effectively reach out to a majority of youth organizations and educational institutions. The project established strong ties and linkage to the Kenya NGO Earth Summit 2002 Forum, a civil society initiative on the preparations towards the Earth Summit 2002 and the Greenbelt Movement. There was also a close collaboration with the WSSD National Preparatory Committee of the Kenyan government.

Clearly, the involvement of youth in environmental protection, economic, and social development is very critical for any society that aspires for a better future. The “Our Common Future” project is a concrete example of inspiration that was drawn from the Earth Charter, empowering young people to participate *creActively* (creatively and actively) in the World Summit for Sustainable Development by identifying priorities for sustainable development in the region, and bringing these to the attention of the policy makers. It is a clear demonstration, that given the time, resources, and the opportunity, young people have the ability to take forward the sustainable development agenda that has been elusive since the Rio Summit in 1992. Indeed, it is my solid hope that the Earth Charter will continue to inspire young people in the quest for sustainable development, especially during the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development 2005 – 2014, for this is the generation that absolutely cannot afford to fail. ●

Notes

1 “Shaping Our Common Future” Project was supported by the Kenya NGO Earth Summit 2002 Forum, and endorsed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The author acknowledges the contribution from Robert Ouma, Faith Mullumba and Muta Maathai (Kenya), Humphrey Polepole (Tanzania) and Joseph Mulindwa (Uganda)

2 Agenda 21 (<http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/index.htm>)

3 The UNEP Global Youth Forum, 25 – 30 March 2002 in Denmark noted “Use the Earth Charter as an education tool and lobby our governments to adopt and endorse the document as a sustainable development framework” (UNEP Global Youth Forum 2002_Youth Action Plans: Small Steps in A Long Journey). See also UNEP Global Youth Forum 2002 Report (<http://www.natur-og-ungdom.dk/pdf/gyf.pdf>) and United Nations World Youth Programme of Action to the Year 2000 and Beyond (<http://www.un.org/events/youth98/backinfo/ywpa2000.htm>).