

Africa Environment Outlook for Youth Launched at the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment in Brazzaville

“AEO-for Youth: Our Region – Our Life”, the theme of the first youth version of the Africa Environment Outlook report

Brazzaville, 24 May 2006 – Increased human vulnerability to environmental change, severe increases in air and water pollution, sharp losses of biodiversity, increasing pressures on coastlines and overexploitation of natural resources are facing Africa unless urgent action is taken to deliver environmentally-friendly development for its citizens, a report launched today at African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) warns.

The First report chronicling the state of Africa’s environment entirely dedicated to youth on the continent -*AEO-for-Youth: Our Region- Our life*, is the youth version of the First Africa Environment Outlook Report. It is the result of a two- year process in which more that 3000 African Youth from 41 different countries participated. The contributions cover different genres: poems, articles, proverbs, drawing and paintings.

At the launch this evening, the African Union Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, who is in charge of the Environment and natural resources, Mrs. Rosebud Kurwijila, talking to the youth said: “I would like to emphasize that Africa’s environment is an important arena for youth action. Current destructive behaviour against the survival of our environment grew out of uncorrected excesses of old people who were once young. You are today demonstrating that, correct behaviour and understanding can and must not wait, because harmful practises may destroy the environment that you need for future.”

This AEO-for-Youth publication was commissioned by AMCEN and produced by the United Nation’s Environment Programme’s Division of Early Warning and Assessment. It has re-packaged the AEO report in a youth-friendly manner and was authored and illustrated by youth. This young people are members of an AEO-for-Youth network from all over Africa. They submitted contributions that included articles, case studies, poems, photos, paintings, illustrations, quotes and proverbs.

The President of AMCEN, Mr.Abdul-Hakim Rajab Elwaer said: “African youth have joined their hands and spoken out in one voice. This voice captures youth perspectives on the state of the environment and shares youth prescriptions on environmental sustainability. Such unique perspectives should prompt action, not only from policy makers but also among the youth themselves”. “For environmental degradation in Africa to be reversed, it is imperative for African youth to translate their enthusiasm and creativity into action” he added

Due to its youth authorship, the publication has a style and message that is highly appealing to the youth. It has balanced youth contributions with material from the AEO report. The result is an accurate and dynamic publication that makes for exciting reading.

The Officer in charge, UNEP, Mr. Shafqat Kakakhel said: “The voice of youth is an invaluable asset to environmental processes. In capturing this voice, this publication offers young people a

roadmap for Africa's environmental journey towards sustainable development. Given their demographic dominance and creativity, Africa's youth are key stakeholders. The Environmental renaissance underscored in the Africa Environment Outlook process will become even stronger through a systematic youth involvement".

The voice of youth is an invaluable asset to environmental processes. In capturing this voice, the publication offers Africa the fresh perspectives of young people. In capturing the accurate message of the AEO report, the publication offers Africa's youth authoritative environmental information.

Note to Editors

In July 2002, the first Africa Environment Outlook (AEO) report was launched during the ninth session of the African Ministerial Conference on Environment (AMCEN) in Kampala, Uganda. This report mainly targeted policy makers. It became a tool for monitoring sustainable environmental management in Africa and an environmental reporting framework at national levels.

The AEO report was the first comprehensive integrated report on the African environment. This report spotlighted the state of Africa's environment and traced environmental trends since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. It combined this information with the policy impacts and future scenarios for the environment.

For more information on the content of the youth report, please see the attached information briefs.

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Africa Environment Outlook for Youth Our Region – Our Life

INFORMATION BRIEF

ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

The history of Africa's environment can be better appreciated within a social and economic context. Some of the major historical occurrences include the slave trade; colonization; decolonization and independence struggles.

Since time immemorial, the environment has been woven into the lives of Africans. Traditional and cultural values amongst different communities across the region have governed the way in which people interact with the environment, and the way in which natural resources are used and managed.

An environmentally sound and vibrant Africa has yet to be realized. Africans should continue shaping the environmental future of their continent. African leaders should ratify existing treaties, implement existing policies and formulate necessary laws. Vibrant policy action will greatly enhance the efforts of the civil society.

THE STATE OF AFRICA'S ENVIRONMENT

ATMOSPHERE

Africa is faced with three major issues where the atmosphere is concerned, namely: climate variability; climate change; and air quality.

Climate variability is the seasonal and annual change in temperature and rainfall patterns. All African countries are affected by climate variability. There are many reasons behind climate variability, including; atmospheric winds, weather changes between the Indian and the Atlantic oceans and the El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon. Apart from these natural phenomena, human activities such as deforestation and land mismanagement have a direct influence on natural climatic conditions.

Climate change results from higher mean temperatures that are caused by increased greenhouse gases (GHG) in the earth's atmosphere. Carbon dioxide, the most important greenhouse gas, is released during the burning of fossil fuels. Other greenhouse gases are methane, and chlorofluorocarbons (CFC), among others. They are produced from several sources including: factory smoke, exhaust fumes from vehicles, fossil fuel power generation, and forest fires.

Climate change can affect any African country. If the sea level rises when the glaciers melt due to climate change, then seawater will sweep into, and even maybe sweep away, coastal houses. The countries that face a risk of sea level rise include: Egypt, Gambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mauritius, and Seychelles. Climate change can also affect our forests and biodiversity. Different plant and

animal species face extinction if their natural habitats are affected negatively by climate change. Apart from damaging our homes and pushing our plants and animals towards extinction, climate change can also harm our health. Warmer temperatures and altered rainfall patterns could open up new areas to diseases like malaria and yellow fever.

Air quality is a cornerstone of health. It is thus of great concern that high populations in cities, together with increased industrial activities, increase air pollution. Vehicle emissions such as carbon monoxide, benzene, and lead have the most direct effect on the environment.

Policy measures such as high taxes on fuel and on importation of new vehicles have also contributed to emissions, by encouraging the use of dirty fuels and an increase of old and more polluting vehicles.

Pollution can seriously affect our health. Exposure to toxic emissions is associated with acute respiratory infections, lung diseases such as asthma and chronic bronchitis, lung cancer and pregnancy-related problems. Women are particularly vulnerable because of their traditional role as cook, which means that they spend more time indoors and close to pollution sources.

Although Africa contributes very little to global greenhouse emissions, it remains extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This is because it depends a lot on agriculture.

BIODIVERSITY

The beauty of our continent lies in its rich biodiversity. There are many ecological, economic, and social values of biological resources. These resources are the heart and soul of Africa as they support African economy and livelihoods. Plants and animals provide food and raw material for manufactured goods like household utensils, clothing and paper. Many resources such as timber and agricultural produce are sold or used in traditional crafts like basket weaving and carving.

In addition, local communities and pharmaceutical companies harvest plants with medicinal value. Other plants provide the genetic resources for improved agricultural products such as disease and drought-resistant crops. The richness and diversity of ecosystems in Africa also provide opportunities for tourism.

International efforts to conserve natural habitats have been very successful in Africa, mainly as a result of the ratification of the Ramsar Convention (on Wetlands), and the Convention on Biological Diversity. At the country level, relevant laws and policies have been enacted to protect and conserve biological diversity, especially forests, fauna and wetlands.

Biodiversity is the rainbow of living things. Yet despite its immense beauty and importance, Africa's biodiversity continues to suffer blow after blow. So what remedies will lessen biodiversity's suffering? A key solution lies in giving the proper valuation of natural resources. This way, resources will be valued for their true worth and will thus be consumed sustainably. Another solution lies squarely in the hands of communities. Through community conservation, people will play an active role in conservation. This is already happening through the community based natural resource management (CBNRM) programs.

COASTAL AND MARINE ENVIRONMENTS

Africa's coastline spreads across 40 000 km, in 32 countries. Coastal ecosystems are so biologically productive that they account for 26 per cent of all biological productivity in the world.

Coastal and marine environments are very productive because of their extreme climatic and physical conditions. Africa's coast supports many different resources like mangroves, rocky shores, sandy beaches and coral reefs. Coral reefs and mangroves are especially important features because they protect the coastline by reducing the impact of storms and waves. Reefs and mangroves also contribute a lot to the economies of coastal countries by providing opportunities for tourism and harvesting of resources.

Coastal resources are to coastal communities what fertile land is to farmers. Coastal people use mangrove trees for construction, medicine, food, and small-scale trade. In addition, the natural beauty of the coast attracts tourists. Coastal and marine resources, therefore, have great ecological, social and economic importance, both locally and globally.

Yet despite its enormous importance, Africa's coastline is facing increasing pressures: erosion, suffocated habitats, fewer resources, polluted ecosystems and reduced biodiversity. Consequently, there is a drop in economic opportunities, thus increasing poverty amongst coastal communities.

Africa's coast is a treasure that must be looked after by all Africans. Solutions to coastal pollution must be implemented both by the government and the people. If we do not manage the coastal and marine resources wisely, poverty will increase.

FORESTS

Forests play a vital role in the survival of human population and provide habitats for many animal species. Forests indirectly regulate the environment by slowing soil erosion. They control the run-off of rainwater and store it, and regulate its release into our rivers and lakes. Globally, forests help to regulate the climate and protect coastlines.

Forests and woodlands are remarkable ecosystems. The moist tropical forests of Africa support an estimated 1.5 million species that in turn support the local communities in terms of food, shelter, utensils, clothing, and medicinal needs. Some of the forests have multiple uses. Many commercial crops originate from tropical forest plants such as coffee, bananas, oranges, sugar, pineapples, rice, maize and cocoa.

Forests are caretakers of the soil – they protect it from erosion and contribute to its fertility. They accomplish this by maintaining the balance of nutrients in the air, soil, water, and organisms. Forests also prevent silting of water downstream, and control the drought-flood cycles in rivers. Major hydroelectric schemes can suffer if these phenomena are disrupted, resulting in a lower capacity for power generation that can affect industries and their ability to provide employment.

The moist tropical forests of Africa support an estimated 1.5 million species, which in turn support the local communities in terms of their food, shelter, utensils, clothing, and medicinal needs. By far the most dominant use of woodland resources is for domestic energy needs, mainly from wood and charcoal. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, these traditional fuels accounted for 63.5 per cent of total energy use in 1997. Other forest and woodland resources gathered and used by households or traded informally amongst villagers include meat, fruits, honey, and vegetables, construction materials and medicinal products.

Sadly, our forests are on the decline. They have been drastically reduced in size over the last century as countries struggled to improve their economies through exploitation of natural resources. Deforestation for commercial timber sales and clearance for agricultural and urban developments are the most intensive pressures. Other pressures include overharvesting of wood for fuel, medicine, and construction materials. The remaining forests have also been degraded as a result of clear felling, fires, and selective harvesting. Impacts of this degradation include losses of biodiversity, soil erosion, increased risk of flooding, and loss of livelihoods for local communities.

FRESHWATER

Even though 71 per cent of the earth's surface is water, less than 3 per cent is freshwater, and most of that is either in the form of ice and snow in the polar regions, or in underground aquifers.

Over the last 30 years, a lot of efforts have been made to increase the availability and distribution of water. However, many people continue to lack access to water for domestic use. By contrast, some industries and people who have easy access to water have no incentive to use water carefully, or to recycle it.

Water access is a priority issue for African countries. Water scarcity is experienced in 14 of the 53 African countries. The high demand for water has led to unsustainable practices and competition between sectors, communities, and nations. Low investment in water supply and infrastructure maintenance, increasing demand from all sectors, and inequitable access policies have added further strain to the situation, resulting in unequal access to water.

When water quality declines, water shortages are intensified, through increased costs of water treatment and increased time spent in collecting water. Reduced water quality can also lead to reduced biodiversity. Freshwater lakes, wetlands and dams have suffered biodiversity loss, due to industrial pollution and contamination of water sources. This has led to an increase of water-related diseases and a decline in water-intensive industries. Almost all African countries experience problems of water quality and are struggling to upgrade water treatment and wastewater processing plants. Better water management will lead to better distribution and sustainable usage.

LAND

Africa is the second largest region in the world, accounting for 20 per cent of the world's landmass (2 963 313 000 ha). Most Africans live in rural areas, where they practice small-scale

cultivation or pastoralism. Consequently, the direct dependence on land creates production pressures and competition for resources.

Approximately 22 per cent of vegetated land in Africa (494 million ha) has been classified as degraded. Desertification describes an extreme form of degradation in dryland areas (land that is no longer productive). Currently, 46 per cent of Africa's land area is vulnerable to desertification, especially along desert margins and areas that have high populations.

The land of Africa is full of invaluable resources. It is the foundation of economic, social and environmental development. Traditionally, African societies depend directly on subsistence farming to meet their daily needs. Commercial agriculture is equally important as it employs the largest number of people in most countries. It also contributes significantly to export earnings and national economic growth. Our land is our heritage and our pride. It is up to us to shower it with care so that it can continue nourishing us.

URBAN AREAS

Africa's rate of urbanization of 3.5 per cent per year is the highest in the world. This fast growth can be attributed to a general public feeling that urban areas have better schools, more hospitals, more jobs and good social services. As more people are drawn to the cities, more pressure piles up on those cities. The increased demand for shelter and services, as well as rising consumption, has often resulted in many social and environmental problems.

African cities account for 60 per cent of the region's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and are important centres for education, employment, and trade. Several factors, which can be classified as 'push factors' and 'pull factors' contribute to urban growth. The push factors compel people to leave rural areas in pursuit of a better life in urban areas while the pull factors attract people to the urban areas.

One of the challenges that has arisen from high urbanisation is waste management. The amount of waste generated in African cities since 1990 far exceeds the capacities of most municipalities to collect, treat and dispose of waste. Only one-third of the waste generated in African cities is disposed of formally. Lack of suitable landfill sites, and rapid filling of existing ones is a problem experienced by many municipalities. Other problems include lack of integrated waste management policies, inadequate funds and low access to appropriate, affordable technologies. Some African countries have taken measures to reduce the health risks associated with waste and pollution. These are measures like household electrification, promotion of low-smoke fuels and improved ventilation.

Cities are the heartbeats of nations. They generate jobs and investment opportunities. They also host the headquarters of most governments and international institutions. Unfortunately, the growth of urban areas often means the destruction of the environment. Environmental protection should go hand in hand with city growth. Good city planning will reduce the expansion of slums and protect the environment.

HUMAN VULNERABILITY TO ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Environmental change has left many Africans vulnerable due to increased risk and inadequate coping capability. Many people in Africa depend directly on what they can grow, catch or gather. They are, therefore, more vulnerable to environmental change than people in other regions of the world.

Human-induced environmental change, brought about by rapid population growth and overexploitation of natural resources, is considered to be one of the main causes of natural resource degradation, deepening poverty and increasing food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa.

Over the past 30 years, many African countries have faced increasing risk from floods, earthquakes, lava flows, fires, droughts, civil strife, and armed conflicts. These disasters have increased poverty, intensified serious health problems, and resulted in hunger. In addition, they have displaced populations across national borders and internally, contributing to further environmental degradation, and leading to more vulnerability and insecurity.

A total of 26 armed conflicts erupted in Africa between 1963 and 1998, affecting 474 million people in Africa, or 61 per cent of the population. The resulting refugee settlements often lead to environmental degradation that, in turn, increase human vulnerability, exposing the refugees to health risks. Environmental change due to environmental stress has played an indirect role in the outbreak of conflict. Environmental stress—including deforestation, land degradation and scarce supply of freshwater—alone, and in combination with high population density, increases the risk of low-level conflict. Armed conflicts, in addition to exacerbating environmental degradation and increasing human vulnerability, also cause a lot of damage to invaluable environmental resources, especially wildlife and biodiversity.

A key response to reduce the vulnerability of people is early warning. Various early warning initiatives have been implemented in the region. The Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) is perhaps one of the more widely known initiatives in Africa. The 1985 famine in Ethiopia galvanized African countries to establish FEWS. The main objective of FEWS is to lower the incidence of drought-induced famine by providing timely and accurate information to decision makers regarding potential famine conditions.

OUTLOOK AND POLICY RESPONSE

The future depends on the present. A sustainable development strategy in Africa depends on insight into the present and the future. Since the future is essentially unknown, we need to develop proper mechanisms for understanding it. These mechanisms are captured in four scenarios that offer different opportunities for Africa's future. These scenarios are Market Forces; Policy Reform; Fortress World and Great Transitions. The driving forces behind these scenarios include demographics, economics, social issues, culture and governance.

The Great Transitions scenario offers the greatest promise for the continent over the next 30 years, while the other scenarios spell out the potential setbacks and failures that the future may present.

The Great Transitions scenario is expected to usher in better educational facilities; greater empowerment of all people, especially women; and absolute reductions in poverty levels through enlightened policy reforms. It is also expected to bring about greater political consciousness and commitments at local, national, regional, and global levels, through visionary leadership, the eradication of corruption, and improved economic performance. This scenario also embraces increased regional cooperation on all levels, including environmental management. Some initiatives in Africa already subscribe to the principles of the Great Transitions. Examples include the Africa Union, the 2001 Millennium Africa Recover Plan (MAP), and the evolution of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

The Great Transitions scenario represents a very optimistic and achievable view of the development of the environment in Africa, as well as all over the world. In this scenario, Africa can emerge as a continent with a rich and sustainable future.

ENVIRONMENTAL YOUTH ACTION IN AFRICA

Youth can no longer sit in the stands, cheering or jeering the policy makers. They must live their convictions and participate fully in the field of the environment. Many youth organizations, educational institutions and young people as a whole are already involved in active environmental work. A chronicle of their profiles provides a full overview of youth environmental work across Africa.