

Our second "Discussions Among Friends" brings us Daniel Wasonga, a graduate student in Environmental Education who currently works with Rural Energy Enterprises Network Kenya. He is also actively involved in environmental activism through the Africa Youth Initiative for Climate Change. In the run-up to this year's COP17 in Durban, South Africa, he has been involved with the media team and blogged about the activities happening in preparation for the event. He has previous experience with the United Nations Environmental Programme and is currently an Africa Union Youth Volunteer.

1. What's your academic background? What made you decide to enter into the field of climate change and energy advocacy?

My academic background is in Environmental Education. While in school I singled out climate change advocacy as my area of interest. Environmentalism has picked up enthusiasm over the last few decades and particularly climate change in the last few years. I believe that we still have time to make a change and curb the detrimental effects on Mother Nature. All we need is to make the 'noise' and push the word leaders to listen and devote resources into tackling environmental issues.

2. Your contributions to Rural Energy Enterprises Network Kenya and Africa Youth Initiative for Climate Change are very interesting. Can you further elaborate on what these organizations' efforts and goals are? Do you think Kenya needs more grassroots organizations in order to voice their concerns to the government?

Rural Energy Enterprises Network (REEN) is a youth-led organization that acknowledges the fact that the youth in Kenya and generally the world's youth have so much energy and enthusiasm to offer to the community. This energy only needs to be channeled into the right initiatives. It is in that respect that we decided to bring on board the youth and tap the potential in meaningful projects especially in the efficient energy sector in the rural community.

Many big organizations in the world focus on renewable energy solutions, which is a noble move but they often fail to consider that it is somewhat a long shot for rural communities who can barely afford a meal in a day. This is why we decided to focus on the efficient energy solutions that are affordable like energy saving jikos (cookers). These interventions are not only affordable but also green as they encourage conservation of the environment.

Organizations in Kenya, especially the non-profit ones go for quick fixes in solving environmental issues hence they establish themselves in urban or peri-urban areas. This alienates the areas that need these interventions the most. More grassroots organizations are crucial for rural communities who want their voices heard on the national platform.

3. From your perspective, what are the top three challenges associated with climate change and sustainable development in Kenya? In your perspective, how will climate change impact Kenya 10 years from now?

Lack of political will tops the list of climate change and sustainable development challenges in Kenya. Many political leaders and private sector leaders, who themselves have political interests have hindered efforts by honest organizations to make a positive change in sustainable development. A good example is the Environmental Impact Assessments done in Kenya, protecting the powerful individuals who have defaulted the regulations of development projects and premises.

Additionally, many Kenyans spend their time trying to put food on the table. Issues like conservation, climate change, and sustainable development take a back seat because they are not of immediate importance to the poor. They do not understand that climate change, sustainable development, and poverty are all intertwined and this is because no one bothers to talk about these issues in a more understandable way. Informal and non-formal Environmental education lacks in making the local people understand the effects of climate change.

Enactment of laws and regulations relevant to environmental protectionism are inadequate, partly due to the above-mentioned political influences and lack of capacity to enforce these regulations. The environmental law institutions are incapacitated in enforcing the law of offenders due to vested personal interest from the 'People in power' and overlapping mandates in other departments. Ministry of land and ministry of forests all have mandates on the use of government land and they often clash. This leaves the environmental law institution (NEMA) in the middle.

Ten years from now, the climate change situation in Kenya will be worse. The global economic woes have reversed the little efforts that were made especially in the eco-tourism sector. One of the main foreign exchange earners is tourism and the dwindling number of tourists visiting Kenya is spelling doom for the industry. This has further been galvanized by depletion of once famous tourist attractions like the coral reefs at the coast, Mau forest escarpment in the Rift Valley province, and the potential drying up of the Mara River that is the lifeline of 7th Maasai Mara, home to the wilder beast migrations spectacle.

4. What do you think of Kenya's progress in addressing these concerns? Who are the main actors (government, businesses, NGOs, universities, etc.) and how are they contributing to solving these problems? How would you rate Kenya's efforts compared to the other African countries?

Kenya's progress in addressing these issues is far from satisfactory. With many institutions infiltrated with corruption, not much will happen provided it affects the

corrupt individuals' interests. The government has the leading role in tackling environmental issues; the policies and reforms by the government are necessary in guiding other players like the NGOs, universities and the private sector. The universities should be the fountain of research that can be used to help address the problems; unfortunately we still lag behind in this respect, partly due to the government's failure to commit resources to the universities for research.

Many businesses have in the recent past come out as part of their corporate social responsibility to sponsor communally beneficial projects, most of which are environmental. Sustaining this trend is necessary.

Numerous NGOs in Kenya have turn out to be briefcase, swindling the donor's funds then going underground. With proper and stricter regulations for these NGOs, a lot could have been done. Some of them albeit international, have done wonderfully well such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Africa Wildlife Foundation (AWF), Greenbelt Movement and so forth. Many of these organizations are for environmental conservation, and this particular area is improving.

Kenya's efforts in climate change issues are well in the top five on the continent. We have the most vibrant networks of youth doing great projects in their communities, minimal government support notwithstanding. A country like Equatorial Guinea has still the best forest cover, but with the booming oil business, the government is clearing away forests to develop infrastructure. I am afraid they will go the Kenyan way where we only have 2% of forest cover left. The worst part is that they have absolutely no environmental activism going on.

5. Will you be attending COP 17? What do you think it means for COP 17 to be held in Africa? What's your expectation of the COP17 negotiation and how will it affect Africa?

I will not be able to attend COP17 in Durban, South Africa due to other commitments but I am happy to say that I was involved actively in the organizing of the 'Climate Caravan to Durban' that is currently underway. Africa has a chance to negotiate its own climate future regarding the fact that the developed countries are the worst polluters of the environment. The previous COPs have not been so successful due to the unwillingness of some developed countries to compromise. I am not too optimistic about the COP17 in South Africa, Africans do not have much influence but we will keep on pushing for demands

6. What do you think are the biggest challenges faced by African youth today? What do you suggest for other young Africans to do?

Unemployment has to be the biggest challenge face by African youth today. With a 60% population in the continent and less than half of them employed, a time bomb ticking

and it won't be long before more unrest and probably revolutions are expected in the sub-Saharan Africa as was witnessed in the Northern Africa's "Arab Spring".

Africa's youth population go into marriage while young, and with no jobs or informal jobs, they aggravate the population growth situation by bearing more children than they can care for. This has made it difficult for governments to plan for the citizen in terms of public resources and amenities in Africa. Insecurity results since they have to provide for the huge families they have.

7. This is a bit off topic, but do you think your country and other countries should do more to help mitigate the instability of Somalia? If yes then how and if no then why?

Kenya and more countries especially in Africa should come and help restore stability in Somalia because if the terrorist group is left to govern the country then the instability will slowly but surely engulf the whole continent in the future. Helping Kenya handle the refugees is one way other countries can help because the refugees have become a source of security threat to the country.

8. If you had one message that you could spread around the world, what would it be?

One message that people believe is dead but is not and could be the solution to many problems in the world now is LOVE. Many will think that this is a visionary's sentiment but there is still a little love in everyone, if we can all love people around us, peace and prosperity will be achieved in the world.