

We are the Earth – Steps (ways) to an ecological conversion

My names are Monicah Wanjiru from Kenya. I work with an organization called Young Christian Workers which is a movement for young people with a mission to evangelize and educate young people in the world of work.

The overall aim of the presentation will be to share the current realities of the young people in Africa in regard to Climate change; their awareness, experiences, initiatives and challenges; their engagement, interaction with, and reflections on the encyclical Laudato Si; and hopes and responsibilities for the future. For this i will share profiles and testimonies, surveys done, reflections and actions of the youth from different countries.

Realities

My grandfather lived to see 3 centuries; born in the 19th century, lived through the 20th century, and died in the 21st century at the age of 116. He had many good attributes but what I found most special in him, and what he tried to instil in us, the younger generations, is his love for God's creation. He had a very close connection in nature; he loved animals and they loved him back, he nurtured vegetation and in turn they supplied him with food and medicinal value such that he never ever got sick in all the 116 years of his life. I guess the most serious sickness he got was a common cold which he managed using barks, roots and honey all from his farm.

He may not have understood the complexities of climate change as we do today, but one thing he was aware of is the fact that the environment had changed;

- rainfall patterns had changed over time,
- rainfall seasons, and amounts were not as predictable as before,
- water levels in rivers and dams were decreasing,
- some plants ceased to exist in his locality some of which used would provide him with roots and backs used as medicine,
- there incidences of new insects and pests attacking crops while some insects he used to see in his farm disappeared or maybe migrated to other hospitable environments,
- there was increased frequency of some diseases in humans
- the weather in his village got less cold and more hot,
- crop production levels were decreasing

He used to tell us than we, humans, had made God angry and that was why he was hitting back through changes in the environment. In his own words and his own understanding, he was trying to show us, the younger generations, that there exists a connection between God and his creation. And that humans had a moral and ethical responsibility to care for all of God's creation. He used to emphasise that in order to make the world better it starts with our own compound within the farm. And because of that, he always made sure that we, his grandchildren, great grandchildren, got busy around the farm cleaning it, loving and taking care of the livestock, planting two trees for every one tree cut, collecting tree seeds from the ground and placing them under the soil. He made it fun to plant trees because he made it look as a competition as to whose seeds would germinate first. So that got us busy around the farm, collecting the fallen seeds, planting them, and waiting sometimes for years for a seed to germinate.

One thing he raised a lot with us is that during his time, the society's moral fabric was intact and the environment was very much in the same way as he had found it. However, towards the end of the 20th century, he noted that there was a deficiency in the societal morals and norms as he had known them and the quality of the environment

had decreased. Without knowing it, he was telling us that there is an intricate relationship between the environment and humans. That environmental degradation was well connected to the human and ethical degradation as well pointed out in the Laudato Si (no. 56).

What am trying to say is that as young people, we get to learn a lot about the environment, how it was before as compared to what it is now, from our older generation which include our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. It is information and knowledge that is passed on from generations to generations, though it also exists in written forms in different publications.

In some areas, one way that the older generations ensured that the environment was well taken care of is by regarding some places as Holy grounds where God resided. From the former years until now, those places are regarded as Holy and that means no one is allowed to tamper with the biodiversity. Well today, with our understanding that God is everywhere, those places are still held with the same importance as they did before and in some cases we have seen governments and even the UN given those places special attention to ensure their protection. In Kenya, we have 42 main communities, each speaking their own language. Most of these communities have places which they consider Holy places and as such, the communities take deliberate action and enact laws to protect them. An example of such protected Holy place is Arabuko Sokoke forest in the coastal part of Kenya. It is known as a butterfly sanctuary and also hosts a lot of rare biodiversity. Well the protection of biodiversity is something that we find in many places around the continent of Africa. The beauty of it is that the protection initiatives come along with different historical stories of why they should be protected. These diverse stories spun thousands of years before Christianity was introduced and give justification as to why people should protect them and emphasise of the importance of passing the information to the younger generations. Example of such stories are that these Holy places should be protected because they are places where God first created man and woman, or because they are places where God resides (some of the God's residences are volcanic mountains and the roaring of the volcanoes were considered as God's angered voice and eruption was considered as God's show of anger and displeasure with the humans).

Young people interact with the environment from their childhood years and environment conservation and sustainability is communicated and instilled from a young age, through practice. Though we have to note that in my childhood years, the language used by my grandfather was not as we use it today. He may not have known the terminologies such as climate change but in his own words, he would emphasise on taking care of God's creations as it a responsibility given to us by God.

Today's generation of young people are better versed with the intricacies of environment and how changes in the environment have affected us. The younger generation have more access to information (compared to my grandfather's generation) on the environment, causes and effects of climate change, and how we can take some steps to try and mitigate the negative effects of climate change while at the same time conserve what is left.

Recently in some parts in Kenya, there occurred a phenomenon that caught us by surprise. It snowed. Yes, there was snow in a place that has never snowed and this caused quite an excitement as well as worry as to where the effect of climate change would take us. For these areas that experienced snow, business stopped for some hours just so people could really try and fathom what was happening. Even the livestock were a bit confused because all over sudden, the ground which is normally green had turned to white and it was funny to see some cows running away from the snow, only to realize that the whole place was white with snow and there was nowhere to run to.



The fact that the cows had no place to run to and hide away from the snow basically tells us that in the end, if we do not stop destroying the environment, we will have no place to run to and hide from the effects of climate change.

This will lead to understand how climate change is perceived, understood, mitigated and communicated by today's young people. The realities are influenced by various parameters which include societal norms, cultural practices, educational systems, political and economic environments.

Various initiatives have been undertaken by the youths within their localities and some extend to the national level do address climate change either as a direct intervention and impact projects or through advisory, advocacy and legislative endeavours.

Youth engagement and participation has been through various modes that include leadership and capacity building through education and trainings (formal and informal), partnerships and collaboration for resource sharing, joint action and impact, environmental entrepreneurship, and decision making within governance systems.

Realities of young people

Challenges

- Inadequate collaborative actions and plans (there are good initiatives but are more localized and at a small scale)
- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Social inequalities

Hopes

- An enlightened generation
- Communication platforms that allow exchange and sharing
- Opportunity for collaboration, resource pulling and collective bargaining for larger scale impact

Laudato Si in the world of the young people

It is a given fact that Pope Francis, as a person, has endeared himself into the lives of the young people. He speaks and gives his messages in a language and manner that resonates with the young people. I think the content of the Laudato Si is the most shared across different platforms in the social media. We feel that he speaks to us especially with his persistent call to young people to get up and do something. It is a call enshrined in the Bible, where young people are asked to make use of their youth in a responsible manner. We are called to first acknowledge the gift of youthfulness (as it won't last for long) and secondly to make use of this gift to contribute to the common good. It is a call for young people to take responsibility of their own existence in this world, and at the same time, leave the world in a better place than they found it.

Laudato Si came at an opportune time, as today we are facing the consequences of mother nature who is angry at humanity (as my grandfather would put it). Laudato Si is not introducing a phenomenon of climate change to us, but it is an enlightenment and an awakening to the facts that if we do not do something, we are in deed destroying ourselves. It is also an awareness we are all in it together. Humans are not separate from nature, but we are all part of the environment.

It is important to note that by reading the Laudato Si, one experiences a great impact on profound reflections, questions and awareness. Young people within different forums have made reflections on Laudato Si to first explore its content and its message which brings more awareness on the global issue of the environment and secondly to explore actions, no matter how small, that could be done to ensure that the environment is conducive and sustainable to the future generations. The encyclical has been appreciated as it has been perceived as an eye opener to the globalization of the environmental issues and more specifically to aspects of climate change. This is not to deny the fact that a lot of work has been done and information generated by different local, national and international organizations. However, we feel that encyclical has had a wider reach as it communicates a message on issues that can be considered as a compendium of present universal crisis affecting everyone regardless of their geographical, cultural, political, social, economic setting; the author is a person who has a pastoral mission and influence to all men of good will; and the language used is simple and understandable.

For different young people, the Laudato Si is seen as “an eye opener”, a “call to action”, a “reminder of our responsibility as young people”, a “call to live a healthier life”, a “call to take up our role as co-creators of God”, a “motivation and hope”, an “opportunity for attitude and mind-set change, an “opportunity to re-evaluate our values and value systems”. It is a common agreement among young people that the encyclical is an eye opener to the reality on our environment and a call to urgently respond to the issues raised.

As a member of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) movement, and just like other Catholic action movements, we appreciate a lot the fact that, in writing the encyclical, the Pope used a methodology that is very dear to us; the SEE-JUDGE-ACT methodology. The first chapter looks deeply into the realities we are facing today (SEE), the following three chapters are more of a reflection on our values, principles, and responsibilities as Christians and as humans (JUDGE), and the last 2 chapters are a call to action (ACT). This is a methodology that calls us to a life of reflection and action. As we see it in the Bible, faith without action is dead. And we believe strongly that it is through our actions that we can truly profess our faith, serve God and bring transformation in the world we live in. It has called us to an apostolic renewal not only to profess, but to lead by example and be witnesses,

an appeal that dates back to the words of Paul VI; *“The modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers [...] and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses”*.

It is important to note that the first apostle to a young person is another young person. The young people should be the *“the first to carry on the apostolate directly to other young persons, concentrating their efforts within their own circle, according to the needs of the social environment in which they live”* (Apostolicam Actuositatem No. 12). Through this practise, there has been youth forums organized to challenge each other to read the Laudato Si, reflect together on the issues raised by the encyclical, and discuss possible intervention and actions.

The Young Christian Workers movement is constantly looking into ways of supporting the young people through trainings and formation programs which encourage young people to take a broader perspective in understanding the realities within their environments, become more conscious of their responsibility as humans and as Christians, and take deliberate actions to bring change while being enlightened by the principles of the Catholic social teaching.

As young people, and as a YCW member, it is important to appreciate the fact that the encyclical sets ground for action which is geared towards responding to the urgency of the present situation of our environment. The link between environmental crisis and social questions challenge the young people on their role as leaders and participants in addressing the environmental problems arising from poor functioning consumer systems and global economic systems which have a direct effect on majority of the population who suffer most from the effects of the climate change.

When speaking about the environment, one aspect important to note is that we are not only talking about the physical external environment, but also about internal psychological environment. It is not just about climate, land, air, and other natural resources, but also about our inner mental environment. What happens in the environment around us affects the inner environment and affects the psychological health, sense of well being and happiness and inner peace. As we examine the external world, we need also to be aware that it largely affects our inner world.

A movement from Awareness to Action

Well, how do we move from an increase of awareness to an increase in commitment to bring change? For this we have to acknowledge that we need to reinforce the positive habits and practices while doing away with the some habits that prove to be destructive. We need a movement from “What is good for me” to “What is good for all”. It is a movement of not just changing things, but a movement to transform our surrounding. It is an undertaking where we acknowledge that the world has become a village and that what we do today within our localities has a profound effect in people living in other localities and the effect may have severe impact on future generations. The choice is ours on whether we want to effects and impact to be positive or negative. and this calls for commitment and sacrifice in order to leave the world in a better place than we found it.

As the encyclical puts it and as my grandfather would say, the world needs to be loved and taken care of. We can not commit to care for something if we do not love it. St Francis of Assisi puts it very well in the beautiful canticle, Laudato Si, mi Signore, showing through words and actions his profound love for nature.

As young people, we need to experience this profound love for our surrounding, nurturing it so that it may remain to be resourceful even for the future generations. As mother Teresa would put, it calls us to take actions, no matter how small, with great love. And it may mean doing ordinary things in extraordinary manner. This may call

for small disruption of what is normal habits or practices but it would be a necessary disruption if it means that the future generations have a place to call home.

What can the young people in Africa share with the world?

With reference to specific examples i would like to share some good practices and highlight some initiatives undertaken by the young people in thier efforts to care for our common home. On one perspective the individual initiatives may seem to have little impact, but when aggregated together, they contribute a lot to trying to the normal balance of our environment.

On a broader perspectives some of the initiatives include;

1. Education and training.

We say that the best teacher to a young person is another young person. Oreintation by young people, for young people, among young people encourage participation, provide platforms for young people to engage actively and voice their concerns, and promote responsibility through actions. Different countries have development programs targeting the youth providing both formal and informal learning platforms.

Youth groups organized through the church, government bodies, non governmental organizations, development agencies, private sectors undertake various training and formation programs addressing the environment.

They cover different areas such as;

- leadership capacity building,
- training on existing environmental laws and land use policies,
- afforestation and re-afforestation,
- sustainable agriculture production and utilization,
- land reclamation,
- tree nursery establishment
- use of alternative sustainable technologies of environmental resources

2. Engagement in decision making and policy making; leadership and governance

Legislation and policy making play a big role in influencing our environments.

In some countries in Africa, the use of plastic bags has been totally abolished and is enforced through laws which give guidelines as the use of plastics and the penalties for breaking the law. The theory behind this laws is, 'why should we use an item (plastics) that has a life line of tens of years, to carry or cover items (consumer goods) that have a life line of a few days, weeks or months?' In some country like Rwanda, the law allows ones luggage to be checked at border points and any plastic bags found are removed from the luggage.

This kind of laws ensure that we do not choke our environment with plastics.

There exist laws that determine the mode of land use to ensure that the land resources are not exploited or put at risk of being destroyed. These laws protect the environment from wrongful or destructive use. They include laws on commercial use of water resources, use of forested land, use protected land, commercial and domestic cultivation, commercial land use of mountainous terrain, prevention of pollution (land, air, noise, water, mind), emmission of carbon into the environment etc.

The involvement of communities in decision making before any large scale development is undertaken has ensured that history and importance of resources is maintained. Carrying out of environmental impact assessment before undertaking a project touching on the environment ensure that local communities are engaged in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the projects, analyse the possible threats and

opportunities that may arise from the projects and based on this give recommendations on whether the project would be viable or not.

3. Institutional support

We have seen an increased support of the young people by governments, non-government, religious, financing and development institutions. Youth development funds and programs have been established within constitutional framework of some governments ensuring that different insitutions within the governments address the development of the capacity of the young people. The youth development fund, support the youth through providing education and training, providing financing or co-financing of youth projects, promote engagement and participation in different forums and government initiatives (for example, the need to have youth representation in all government bodies and functions and establishment of youth desks at local, national and continental – African Union levels), providing platforms that nurture and encourage innovations meant to improve the quality of life while sustaining the environment, etc

4. Partnerships and collaboration with private and public sectors

As we have seen, the challenges we face today call for collaborative and wide scale approach to address them. Different countries have embraced public-private-partnership and south-south collaboration with the aim of transfroming our environments. This collaboration has seen the partnering and networking between governments, non-government organizations, civil society, private companies, faith based organizations, and established youth groups.

5. Promote environmental social entrepreneursh

The environment provide a source of livelihood for the largest population. With the challenges we face today, there has been a call to identify new and innovative sources of livelihood to support a sustainable way of life. To ensure decent employment in a just and sustainable way, environmental social entrepreneursh has been encouraged among the young people through mentorship, material, financial, structural and legislative support.

On a specific perspective, some of these initiatives include;

1. Recycling of plastics

Plastics have proved to be a nuisance to the normal balance of life, chocking the life of out vegetation while in some areas constituting the daily diet of livestock. In Kenya for example, continued research over several slaughther houses in the country showed that livestock animal kept for meat production had an average of 3 plastic bags within its digestive systems. It means that the plastics had polluted the environment so much such that the livestock animals could not differentiate what is food and what is not food.

To avert this, some young people and youth groups initiated projects meant to rid the environment off the plastics. Various initiatives were started which include;

- Making of fencing posts using plastics
- Making accessories like bags, mats, wall hangings using plastic papers,
- Reuse of plastic containers

2. Establishment of tree nurseries

Over the years, deforestation has destroyed a big portion of the forested land. The other challenge identified was lack of seeds to re-establish the forests. Young people and youth groups have taken up this challenge by sourcing for tree seeds and establishing tree nurseries where they raise tree seedlings which are then sold or

donated to the local communities for planting. This is initiative which endeavours to make the environment more green, provide clean air, control other environment calamities like strong winds, floods, land slides, soil erosion while at the same time make the environment conducive for living in.

3. Use of alternative sources of fuel

They include energy saving technologies, clean energy technologies and recycled energy sources.

4. Protection of forested areas

This is done through non cultivation of forests, relocation of people living in forests, enshrine laws for land use for the the people whose homes and llivelihoods have always been in the forests, prosecution of people who grab land in forested and protected areas.

5. Promotion of agro-forestry

This include integration of forestry in agricultural practices.

Good practices among the young people in Africa (what to share with the world)

Hopes and responsibilities for the future

The youth are a very creative, energetic, imaginative, enthusiastic and an important group which make up the largest portion of the population. In order to create the world we want, it is important for the youth to not only share their hopes and dreams but also to live up to their responsibilities in realizing these hopes and dreams. Sharing about the good practices from local to national levels will be an opportunity to see how young people are actors of change which is aimed at transforming their realities.