



Why I Care about the Environment

Dennis Milanzi

Environmental care is rooted in God's creation story

The environment is the first thing that God created in the creation story. And caring for the environment is the core responsibility given to humanity. According to Genesis (1:28, 2:15), Adam and Eve were given two responsibilities: to develop well and be productive themselves, and to manage the world so that it also would develop well and be productive.

Thus, from the very beginning humanity was related to the environment—an environment that God had formed in an act of creativity and innovation and wanted to become productive for the good of its inhabitants, an environment which could support a sustainable livelihood for Adam and Eve. And in order for creation to be productive and provide for human needs, there was need to maintain its goodness, as God said that 'It was good'.

It is this understanding that drives my passion to care for God's environment and motivates me to address the environmental challenges faced by my community.



Reverend Dennis Milanzi with children in Chipungo, Eastern Zambia



Chipungo landscape

Challenges

Deforestation and land degradation are two of the major environmental problems facing Zambia in general and the rural communities of Eastern Province in particular.

Zambia has vast forest resources covering approximately 67% of the total land area.¹ However, Zambia also has one of the world's highest deforestation rates, at nearly 16 percent over the period 1990-2005.²

Annual rates of deforestation are estimated at between 167,000 and 300,000 hectares.³ The conversion of woodland to agriculture, wood harvesting for charcoal production and logging for timber seem to be the main causes of forest loss.⁴ These alarming deforestation levels have increased over the past 25 years: rural communities have seen a rapid increase in population and this has exerted pressure on natural resources. Not many people seem to be aware of the seriousness of this worrisome situation; many people still ignore it. A simplistic conclusion is that poverty or the poor are to be blamed for deforestation.

Land degradation has reportedly occurred in Zambia as a result of unsustainable farming practices such as shifting cultivation, continuous mono-cropping and over-grazing. Land degradation is severe in the Eastern province of Zambia and has resulted in low land productivity, sudden drops in crop yields and animal productivity, and animal diseases. Given that an overwhelming majority of the rural population depends on agriculture, the effect of land degradation is deepening rural poverty.

My challenge is that many communities still think that tree planting is the responsibility of government, and they continue to harvest tree products without planting any trees. This notion is seen even in the Church where very little is said about the effects of our attitude to nature.

Addressing the challenges

In order to address these pressing challenges, Kachere Development Programme has been implementing a project called 'Reducing poverty and deforestation through food security and agroforestry'. Through women's self-help groups, the project aims to propagate a new wave of environmental management which will promote food security at household level while strengthening the stewardship of natural resource management.

So far, Kachere has conducted training sessions, workshops and seminars among 108 women's self-help groups. The project promotes conservation farming and provides technical support with crop diversification and market chain systems to boost agribusiness. New forms of agriculture introduced include fish farming, early maturing seed varieties and profitable crops such as soya beans, cow peas and upland rice. We provide subsidies in the form of seed varieties to the best practicing individuals and groups. We promote the demonstration of tree nurseries: 12,583 trees have been planted in gardens and areas that were no longer productive in order to retain soil fertility. The project is further strengthened through the use of community radio programs to promote awareness-raising.



An established pond for fish farming

Kachere uses a community-based approach in implementing all its programmes. Community ownership and local leadership mean that the project is sustainable in the long term, with locally trained volunteers carrying on the work after funding has ended.

Hope and inspiration

Seeing both men and women engaged in alternative ways of raising their household income and finding new livelihoods gives me hope: women using sustainable forms of domestic fuel; men engaged in fish farming rather than charcoal production; men and women sharing learning experiences in a way that provides a platform for change. These things promote environmental protection, give greater agricultural food security and reduce environmental degradation.

I am also encouraged and inspired by my son Shuko, who in August 2011 at the age of 11 years and 3 months was recognized and designated as an Ambassador for Climate Change by UNICEF. He has influenced me in developing this work.

Looking wider

I have focused on just two of the environmental problems faced by my community in Zambia, but there are others: air and water pollution from factories and mines, failure to enforce existing environmental laws and police international investors, and the wider impacts of climate change and global warming. I believe the Church in Zambia should have a pro-active involvement in disseminating information, changing mindsets, modeling change and advocating consistently and passionately for the promotion of sustainable development. But I also want to encourage Christians in other parts of the world to take an active role in prayer and in caring for the environment.

A tuberculosis message reads, 'TB anywhere is TB everywhere'. Let me rephrase it: 'environmental degradation anywhere is environmental degradation everywhere'.

We need to own the problem and be passionate about it! We need to be united. We need to defend the integrity of creation. Theology is not merely for our guidance but a motivation for holistic action that includes environmental action.

The Christian family worldwide should identify and form Christian Environment Networks of lobbyists and advocates, to strengthen the global voice on sustainable resource management.

And we need to pray in a way that addresses different environmental issues, including the ones that are less visible. These relate to the developed world and nations who are hesitant to sign up to commitments on reducing deforestation, gas emissions and other kind of toxins that continue to pollute the beautiful creation of God.

In these ways we can reverse 'the groaning of creation' caused by lack of good stewardship of God's good creation.

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Notes

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *State of the World's Forests 2011* (Rome: FAO, 2011), p.111.

² FAO EPIC, *Zambia project area*, <http://www.fao.org/climatechange/epic/projects/countries/zambia/en/> (Accessed 26 September 2014)

³ *The REDD Desk Zambia pages: Readiness Overview*, <http://theredddesk.org/countries/zambia> (Accessed 26 September 2014)

⁴ *Ibid.*

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