

Good morning

I'd like to share with you a different perspective of sustainable development – because for drylands a different approach is needed.

The start point has to be the conservation of soil and water. Unlike in conventional definitions, conservation is neither just a consideration nor an afterthought to maintain long-term development.

Moreover, conservation is the only route to development and human security in drylands.

Sustainable conservation is only possible with grassroots action. Individuals, like us, who see the need for change and take action to address it.

In Kenya, 25 years ago I first met a remarkable man called Joshua Mukusya who told me and taught me that “Without Vision, We Perish”.

He also knew that in drylands – as everywhere – people could achieve much more if they worked together. He initiated a self help group called the Utooni Development Project that started with just four members but quickly grew to 52 families. It continues to work today with 34 member families.

Joshua and the Utooni group inspired me to change my study plans from medicine to Peace Studies, such was my belief in what they were doing.

They also convinced me that drylands cannot be conserved or regenerated without taking grass roots action.

Sadly, people in drylands are the least able to do so when burdened by the challenges of finding water to drink and food to eat.

Women in dryland Africa spend up to twelve hours every day to collect water for their families.

Land degradation makes growing enough food in drylands very difficult; not having enough food makes conserving land even harder.

Decisive action is therefore needed to break this vicious circle of land degradation and human insecurity.

Lois Masila, is a member of a self help group supported by the Africa Sand Dam Foundation in Kenya. She epitomises that spirit. Last year she told me, *“We are going to transform our lives, we are going to transform our livelihoods from the water we are getting here”*

This week you will see other fantastic examples of grass roots interventions from the likes of Jal Bhagirathi Foundation, The Savory Institute, Grampari and Garden Africa.

What they all have in common is starting their work with communities and their priorities – then supporting them to implement initiatives and innovations that meet their needs.

My experience of the work done in SE Kenya is just that – supporting communities to create water security and save time by building sand dams. Farmers reduce the time to collect water from an average five hours to only 60 minutes. But it doesn't stop there.

Peter Mwanza is a member of a self-help group called Munyuni. He said, *“Since we built our first sand dam our lives have changed a lot. With water available we can accomplish much. We will use the water for growing vegetables. The work I do will enable my development, I will educate my children so that they have great hope in the future and they will be independent”*

Communities are able to invest saved time in conserving soil and water in their farms through terracing and tree planting. Water from sand dams is also used for livestock, vegetable nurseries and even fish farms.

According to Josephine Musyoka, life for the Kumina Wauni self help group will not be the same again. She told us, *“When we have the fish, we will give them to*

*our children and grandchildren so they can become very brainy and very strong.*

*Then we will eat the fish, because I don't want to die anytime soon. After that, we will sell the surplus to earn an income."*

Furthermore, communities are enabled to practise climate-smart agriculture – growing crops more suited to drylands and diversifying the crops planted including cover crops which improve soil and conserve more water.

The results communities have achieved supported by Africa Sand Dam Foundation are remarkable:

- 93% of farmers are terracing land compared to only 16% across East Africa
- 88% are planting trees on their farms compared to 50% in East Africa.
- 95% of farmers grow at least six varieties of drought resistant crops helping 97% of them to report increased food production.

As we have heard from our eminent speakers, drylands should be a key global priority.

- 80% of the world's poor live there and are dependent on their land for survival.

- However, agricultural land three times the size of Switzerland is degraded every year.

To conclude, there are two things I'd love you to remember today:

First, it is grass roots driven action that frees people from the vicious circle of land degradation and human insecurity.

Second, what makes this possible in drylands is the conservation of soil and water.

Thank you