

Preface

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When I started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya in the 1970s, the idea was simple. By mobilizing rural African women to plant trees we could protect our fragile and rapidly degrading environment. We have now planted more than 35 million trees. Through this simple act, we went on to build a consciousness of the importance of conserving our natural resources for future generations, and helped people stand up for their rights, for the fair and equitable distribution of national wealth to all.

Three decades on, this campaign is as relevant as ever, because it is apparent that the global abuse of the natural world is finally taking its terrible toll. The debate about whether climate change is real or not is over. Unless the carbon-polluting lifestyles of the Northern hemisphere and the massive deforestation in the South are dramatically curbed, our climate is set to change – permanently. And so too, inevitably, will our way of life. If even the more modest scientific predictions come true, warmer temperatures will lead to rising water levels and increased flooding, more frequent droughts, increased disease, changes in the fish-stock and mammals in our oceans, and threats to our global flora and fauna. We will be confronted with massive ecological and economic challenges, and the risk of conflict over dwindling resources will increase.

Africa is the continent that will be hit hardest by climate change and, as I noticed in Kenya 30 years ago, the impact of environmental destruction hits the most vulnerable first – and hardest. Already communities in Kenya are witnessing – and feeling – changes in local and regional climates. In this special edition of *State of the World's Minorities*, you will read personal testimonies from communities across the world. All face immense challenges, as the landscape which they – and their ancestors – have depended upon, is changing before their very eyes.

But if the effects are already being felt, the responses from governments are – as yet – remarkably low-key. Some policy-making initiatives to combat climate change are under way. For example, under the auspices of the UN, 50 Least Developed Countries are now drawing up National Adaptation Plans of Action. In theory, these plans should take on the principles of equity and justice, taking account of the needs of all sectors of society. But all too often vulnerable communities are not consulted by governments. Often marginalized from political power, minority groups have little or no voice when it

comes to having their interests reflected in national decision-making. We saw this all too clearly, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

But it is not only governments which have to act – we all have a part to play. Activists might wonder why, in light of all the other challenges facing them, they should pick up the issue of climate change too. But the connection is obvious: unless the unfolding disaster is addressed, all the problems currently facing these communities – poverty, discrimination, marginalization and, at worst, persecution – are likely to be magnified a hundred-fold. Already local groups are acting in diverse parts of the world, but more needs to be done to influence negotiations over the successor to the Kyoto Treaty, which will run out in 2012.

Finally, at an individual level, minorities need to mobilize. Just as I urged rural women to plant trees and protect their deteriorating environment 30 years ago, so too must we encourage individuals and their communities to come up with their own adaptation plans and coping strategies. In the otherwise gloomy report published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007, it was pointed out that those who live close to the land, such as pastoralists in particular, with their dependence on the vagaries of the weather, may be better placed to adapt than most.

It is a reminder that the response to this global challenge is far too important to be left to politicians and policy-makers alone. Everyone, whoever and wherever they are, can make a difference by engaging less in rhetoric and more in action. ■

