

mainfeature / - WITH GARDY CHACHA

# Mentoring the next Wangari Maathais



An afforestation initiative, dubbed Green Initiative Challenge, has taken root in Kitui, Embu and Machakos counties and it is teaching young students to care for their environment

If Wangari Maathai was to rise from her ashes today, to find large swathes of land being cleared for 'development', and booming real estate, she would not be happy with today's generation.

But there are children she would smile at, probably hug and make lifelong friends. These would be the pupils of 120 schools in three counties: Kitui, Embu and Machakos.

These school children are involved in an afforestation project dubbed Green Initiative Challenge (GIC) funded by Kengen Foundation, Better Globe Forestry and Bamburi Cement.

"I believe these trees will give us timber in future. They will be a source of livelihood," says Mutatu Mutunga, a class seven pupil at Muthwani Primary School in Mwingi, Kitui County.

Mutunga, one of the participants in this project, admits that the curriculum in school is not particular about afforestation and that previously, people showed little interest in planting and caring for trees.

His sentiments are confirmed by Julius Mwanyai, a tree specialist working in the project, who says the current curriculum for primary schools has no apparent commitment to tree-planting.

"Pupils come to school in the morning and leave for home in the evening. Within that time they sit

through largely theoretical classes. I am yet to come across a school whose pupils plant trees as a practical application of the curriculum," says Julius.

In a way, he says, this has contributed to dwindling tree cover in many parts of Kenya. Imparting children with tree-planting knowledge is therefore a virtue, says Hellen Mwaniki, the head teacher at Mashamba primary school in Embu.

Hellen imagines a future where her pupils will have grown into adulthood, running their own lives and making decisions that will have an impact on the environment.

"Unfortunate as it may be, there are parents from around involved with charcoal. Charcoal business is how they make money. The money they use to buy their children school uniform, books and pens to attend school. It is important that we change how these children think about trees and the environment,"

**“Pupils come to school in the morning and leave for home in the evening. Within that time they sit through largely theoretical classes. I am yet to come across a school whose pupils plant trees as a practical application of the curriculum”**

- Julius Mwanyai, tree specialist



she says. On the roadside of the tarmac that connects Machakos and Embu counties there are countless charcoal-selling points.

Travelling deep into the countryside, we come across a mound of burning charcoal. We also see brickkilns which, we are told, burn on trees.

Caring for trees to ensure survival in Eastern Kenya is a commendable undertaking. Already residents are grappling with shortage of water for domestic use. That notwithstanding pupils in the GIC project carry water to school to water their trees.

**1. William Muasya watering a plot within Katuni mixed day secondary school compound.**

**2. A section of a school in Mwea, Embu, where trees planted by students have survived in the last one year.**

**3. Pupils at Mashamba Primary in Embu are assisted by their Head Teacher, Hellen Mwaniki, to plant trees in a section of land belonging to the institution.**

"The general belief among residents in these areas is that trees grow naturally and are to be utilised. We show them that one can take the initiative to plant. That if one can exercise responsible cutting of trees as they care for the environment and derive benefits as well," explains Julius Mwanyai.

It is a noble project, says William Muisya. William is a student at Katuni Mixed Day Secondary School in Mwingi. He will be sitting for his KCSE exams later in the year.

"I love the environment. I want a career in farming and agriculture. I don't dream of law, medicine and nursing like other students. Back at home I have fruit trees - mangoes, oranges, pawpaws, and avocados. It is a skill I learnt from my father and wouldn't want to stop. When the environment is adversely affected those who depend on agriculture suffer the most. For that reason I will plant as many trees as I possibly can."

William is the darling of teachers at his school for his dedication to environment conservation and farming initiatives. Amidst the GIC trees in Katuni he has created a vegetable garden, with kales, cassava and bananas.

'Cut one, plant two'. It was a famous reforestation slogan in the 90s. It was told, reiterated, and burnt into the psyche of pupils. Sadly, that quest, to bring up children who understand and value trees in our environment, may have died down.

According to Hellen Mwaniki, it is part of every head teacher's job description, to plant trees within the school compound.

"I believe that majority of us are not committed to this part of our job

mainfeature / - WITH GARDY CHACHA

# Why Kenya ought to work hard on forest conservation

The United Nations requires that each country achieves at least 10 per cent forest cover.

Going by this threshold, Kenya still has a long way to go as the most recent data from Kenya Forest Service (KFS) indicates our forest cover is at 6.6 per cent.

The exact numbers are not available but many environmentalists believe that Kenya's forest cover was well above 10 per cent at independence.

Clearing land for agriculture, uncontrolled lumbering and charcoal burning are among human activities that have been blamed for deforestation.

The result of deforestation over the years, offered Professor Bridgitte Nyambo of International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) in an interview last year, is climate change, "which now threatens food security and livelihoods."

Trees hold soil structure together and contribute humus content in the soil making farming possible.

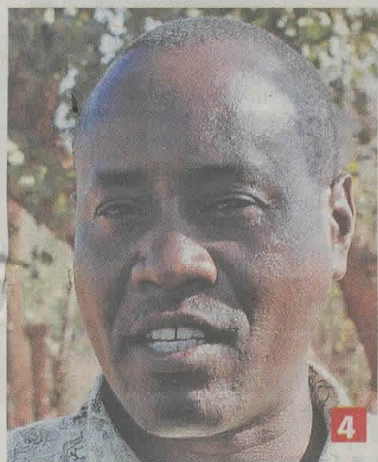
"Trees provide a huge carbon sink for greenhouse gases. The more trees we have the better for the planet and human survival. Less greenhouse gases in the atmosphere would mean less possibility of global warming and hence less erratic climatic patterns," offers Nyambu.

When teaching his students, Festus Ngau, of Muthwani Primary School asks his students to plant trees within their homesteads.

"Our land is arid. We don't get as much rain as other places in Kenya where forest cover is good. And so we suffer from constant water shortage. A good tree cover will improve our chances of being water secure. Everyone therefore has to plant trees for our communities to survive," he says.

In previous interview with Alex Lemarkoko of Kenya Forestry Service (KFS) it became apparent that destruction of trees in Kenya led to extinction of unique plant and animal species.

"The environment grew harsh by the day and that needs to change," he said. "It will be a difficult journey. But for the future of our communities we have to work hard to achieve the desired forest cover."



**4. Julius Mwanjai, a tree specialist who is part of the afforestation project.**

**5. Hellen Mwaniki, head teacher at Mashamba primary school**

**6. Pupils of Mashamba Primary in Embu stand next to one of the trees they planted.**

[PHOTOS: GARDY CHACHA/STANDARD]

because of complacency. If we all did, the tree cover in Kenya would be fairly high," she says.

When she was a young school going girl, Hellen recalls, tree cover in Embu was impressive. But that was probably because forest areas were used as sacred shrines, she points out.

"Today people want to satisfy financial demands. People want to sell charcoal and timber. Or do something else with trees to make money," she says.

The result is evidenced in many parts of Kenya: bare land with nothing much than struggling shrubs.

Hellen looks at the pupils involved in GIC as change makers; the ones applying the first ink in changing the narrative of deforestation.

"Attitudes have to change regarding how trees are used. As the population grows so does the impact humans have on trees. If we don't plant more trees than we are cutting then it becomes difficult to maintain economic activities directly linked to trees," offers James Mwaniki, of Bet-

ter Globe Forestry.

For Patrick Kyeli, the teacher running the project at Masukanoni Primary school in Kitui, the trees currently being nurtured will impact the lives of coming generations.

"If I won't be here when the trees have grown to maturity, those who benefit will be our children and their children. What I hope that this proj-

ect achieves is to change how the whole community looks at trees," he says.

GIC aims at improving forest cover in the three counties with five tree species: three wood varieties and two fruit species. One hundred and twenty schools are involved with each receiving at least 300 seedlings.

Largely arid or semi-arid, Eastern Kenya suffers the ravages of a hot climate. The scorching sun above barely allows any plants to flourish. It is not shocking that trees have a sparse pattern with some places having no trees at all.

And so we were pleasantly shocked to find schools where pupils genuinely engage in tree-planting: watering, tending to and mulching them to ensure survival.

Scanning over the landscape all one sees is a hue of brown: scorched leaves that somehow blend with earth. "We want greenery all around. It will be so good to come to school and walk on green grass and play around healthy green trees," Mutunga says.

