



Leah Mwangi (centre of photo) is project coordinator for the Kenyan organisation Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO). She was present at the 9th Conference of Parties (COP 9) of the Convention on Biological Diversity held in May 2008 in Bonn, Germany.

Who is Leah Mwangi?

'I was born in Nyeri District in Central Kenya, and grew up on the slopes of Mt Kenya in a semi-arid area. At a young age I saw the local forest being destroyed, as charcoal burning was a way of earning a living. The harsh climate meant there were regular famines and drought. This sparked my interest in environmental conservation. While working as a teacher in a local high school I came across KENVO in 2001. By 2005 I had stopped teaching and started working full-time for KENVO, first as a project officer and now as project coordinator. My work has enabled me to understand the linkages between conservation and livelihoods: I have become a defender of community interests and rights.'

Leah Mwangi, defender of community interests and rights:

'Local communities have the potential to achieve conservation and livelihood goals'

Why were you attending COP 9?

'I attended the conference as a representative of a grassroots organisation that works with the local community to address environmental issues and poverty alleviation. My objective was to convey the message that local communities have the potential to achieve conservation and livelihood goals. It was an opportunity to share the experience I have gained working with KENVO and the local impact we have had. I particularly wanted to highlight the role of women in natural resource management.'

'KENVO is a member of the Community Knowledge Service (CKS), set up by the UN Equator Initiative, which supports community efforts to link sustainable economic development and income generation with the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. COP 9 was a great opportunity to meet and talk with other members of the CKS.'

'COP urges parties to promote effective participation of indigenous and local communities when applying the ecosystems approach to agriculture and to strengthen dialogue with farmers.' How can these objectives be realised?

'First, we need to ensure that local and indigenous communities are aware of these statements. Second, actions need to reflect the wishes of these communities. Third, governments and the donor community have to be committed to passing information generated at high-level meetings on to local and indigenous

communities. I believe that strengthening public-private partnerships can help realise this, especially in Africa. In addition, we need more representation of local and indigenous communities at these meetings. One example of this is the Community Dialogue Space created by UNDP and its partners.'

In your view, how do government representatives deal with the sacred and cultural values attached to natural resources by local and indigenous communities?

'Law and policy makers are in a position to influence the government so that it passes laws protecting the rights and values of indigenous and local communities. However, things move slowly. There are laws in Kenya that attempt to protect sacred and cultural values. For example, the Kaya Forest in the coastal region is a sacred place used by the Giriama community for religious practices, and it is now protected by law. The Forest Act recognises the importance of respecting cultural and religious practices of forest communities. However, enforcing this law is a problem. This leads to situations in which groups of people use the forest as a legitimate, sacred place, while at the same time others exploit it illegally. And they even get away with it - that's asking for trouble.'

For more information:
www.kenvokenya.com

