



**MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
OF THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
BRAULIO FERREIRA DE SOUZA DIAS**

**on the occasion of
AFRICA ENVIRONMENT DAY/WANGARI MAATHAI DAY
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“Strengthening women’s rights over natural resources”

Biodiversity – the diversity of life on Earth - underpins the natural resources that provide food and livelihoods throughout the world. For many women, biodiversity serves as the cornerstone of their work, their belief systems and their basic survival. In developing countries in particular, women’s livelihoods are often tied to natural resources. Rights to natural resources are extremely important for women, especially rural women.

Women are responsible for the majority of the food and water security in rural communities in Africa. It is estimated that rural women in Africa produce 80 per cent of the food, and are responsible for most of the storing, processing, transporting and marketing. This makes them disproportionately affected by the loss of biodiversity.

Gender inequality with respect to land ownership is a significant factor that prevents women from escaping poverty. In many places women are prohibited from owning land, either by law or by custom, and the rights that are available to them are often mediated by men. Landless rural women are often dependent on common property resources for food, fuel wood and fodder. A lack of secure land rights in turn prevents farmers from accessing credit, and provides little incentive to invest in improved management and conservation practices. Moreover, women are not systematically engaged in planning, management and implementation related to biological resources.

Notably, there are several prominent initiatives in place in Africa to support ecosystem conservation and restoration, initiatives that emphasize the key role that women play, including the Great Green Wall initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel, which aims to support the efforts of local communities in the sustainable management and use of forests, rangelands and other natural resources in drylands. The African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative, launched in December 2015 at the Global Landscapes Forum and linked to the African Resilient Landscapes Initiative, is another compelling initiative seeking to ensure that restoration is carried out in ways that balance social, economic and environmental objectives, especially in regard to the participation of women, local communities and vulnerable people.



**Convention on
Biological Diversity**

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity
United Nations Environment Programme
413 Saint-Jacques Street, Suite 800, Montreal, QC, H2Y 1N9, Canada
Tel : +1 514 288 2220 Fax : +1 514 288 6588
secretariat@cbd.int www.cbd.int



Among its work towards a mosaic landscape approach, the initiative aims to foster agroforestry and silvopasture. In restoring forests, the initiative aims at planting or supporting natural regeneration of trees on degraded or deforested land. Restoration to natural forests provides ecosystem services and carbon sinks. In some cases, degraded land can also be restored to productive forests to be used for timber, fuel wood and other forest products.

The vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity is embedded in the text of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which affirms the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use. The Convention's 2015-2020 Gender Plan of Action provides a framework of actions for the Secretariat, and identifies possible actions for Parties to mainstream gender in their work to implement the Convention.

The importance of strengthening women's rights over natural resources was also recognized by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Numerous targets are included in the Sustainable Development Goals on equal rights and secure and equal access to land, and ownership and control over natural resources. The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security promote secure tenure rights and equitable access to land, fisheries and forests as a means of eradicating hunger and poverty, supporting sustainable development and enhancing the environment. They were officially endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security on 11 May 2012.

As we celebrate Africa Environment Day/Wangari Maathai Day, we are reminded, as exemplified by Wangari Maathai, that women are powerful agents of change and their leadership is critical in community revitalization and renewable natural resource management. Advancing women's rights and the conditions to support their empowerment, incorporating their knowledge and ensuring their full participation can contribute significantly to sustainable development, to human well-being and to achieving the goals of the Convention on Biological Diversity.
