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## The Role of Churches in Addressing Climate Change

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## **THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE: CASE STUDY OF RWANDA**

*Gloriose Umuziranenge*<sup>132</sup>

The world climate is increasingly changing, causing troubles to environment and we need to act urgently if we are to avoid an irreversible build-up of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and global warming at a potentially huge cost to the economy and society worldwide.<sup>133</sup> The huge challenges of food shortage hitting many countries in Africa as a result of the droughts devastate countries. Kenya, Ethiopia and southern Sudan provide visible examples.<sup>134</sup>

Rwanda is a highly populated and landlocked country located in East Africa. In Rwanda, the potential of agricultural production is relatively high and human activity has been changing the natural ecosystems through agriculture while urbanization is at glance. Population pressure has pushed farmers into increasingly fragile lands. This has resulted in habitat loss and degradation, in the pollution of the soil, water and

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<sup>133</sup> OECD 2008, 5.

<sup>134</sup> CIGI 2009, 9.

atmosphere, soil erosion, as well as climate change. In addition, some species have been lost and ecological processes impaired especially within the protected areas of the country. The aggressive deforestation in the country from 1990 to 2003 following war and genocide against Tutsi including other violent conflicts in neighbouring countries were another factor contributing to that. There was further tree clearing for settlement as Rwandans were returning back home after the genocide, with additional refugees who were hosted from the warring neighbouring countries Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. It is well noted that more than 96% of Rwandan households in rural and urban areas use trees as a source of energy and more than 60% of the urban population use charcoal as a source of energy especially for cooking.<sup>135</sup> This explains why little tree cover remains in a nation called ‘the country of one thousand hills’.

Moreover, the reducing water levels in the major lakes, the unpredictable weather changes, drought, land slides and flooding of the rivers in western Rwanda led to the death of dozens of people and destroyed roads and other infrastructure, as well as significant amounts of agricultural production, swept by the flooding, and houses, leaving many people homeless. High degradation of the natural forests and wetland areas, water, air and soil pollution and the declining productivity of arable lands and triggered a worsening of the food security situation, malnutrition and poor health throughout the country.<sup>136</sup>

The Government of Rwanda put much effort in addressing such problems through national environment policies and poverty alleviation strategies for the better use of natural resources. Churches and parishes in Rwanda guided by the National Environment Plan in their

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<sup>135</sup> CPR 2012.

<sup>136</sup> UNDP 2012.

development plans are not left behind and find it necessary to engage in different activities related to environment conservation. Therefore, Churches put an emphasis on the promotion of sustainable environment for holistic development through promoting livelihood support and sustainable environment programs such as community afforestation programs, sustainable agriculture at household levels, as well as the promotion of energy saving technologies, i.e. stoves and solar lighting for a clean environment.

Protestant churches in Rwanda under the Protestant Council of Rwanda (CPR), created in 1963, are today involved in environmental conservation projects. Member churches involved in these projects are the Association of Protestant Churches in Rwanda, the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda, the 7th Day Adventist Church, the Free Methodist Church, Baptist Union Church, the Association of Baptist Churches, Nazarene Church, Lutheran Church, Evangelical Church of Friends, the Salvation Army and the nine Dioceses of the Anglican Church in Rwanda. Practically, these churches are contributing in addressing climate change and engage programs which protect, promote, rehabilitate and fight against climate change. The projects aim at mobilizing both pastors and lay Christians in parishes and educate them through seminars, short courses and workshops on the issue of environmental degradation due to climate change.

In 2011, CPR organized a church leader seminar on the role of churches in sustainable environment, and this seminar came up with a statement called “CPR’s Theology of the environment”. The statement contains church leaders’ commitment to protect the environment. It became very popular particularly as CPR is implementing actions in collaboration with World Alliance for the conservation of the environment, a UK based organization founded by the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, husband of the Queen of Great Britain and

supported by the UN, World Bank. The statement was published in a book called “Many Heavens - One Earth, Our Continent. Stories of African Faith Commitments”.<sup>137</sup>

During the workshop on the role of churches in addressing climate change held in Nyamata (Rwanda) on 16-18 March, the Anglican Bishop of the Shyogwe diocese said that climate change may cause troubles to human being. Thus, it is the responsibility of the Church to take care of the environment as the bible says in Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work and keep it.” He equally argued that God gave mankind a command and told him that he must tend or keep the garden. Therefore, as good stewards we have a big responsibility to take care of the environment. The Bishop emphasized on the role of churches in educating people on the issue evolving climate change and pass on the message of mitigation, adaptation and prevention of the effects of climate change in various communities in Africa. He said that church leaders must get involved in addressing effects of climate change because it has become one of the greatest challenges in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

The Shyogwe Diocese of the Anglican Church has initiated a project called Rural Development Inter-diocesan Service (RDIS) under the sponsorship of the United Evangelical Mission (UEM) and Bread for the World, religious organisations based in Germany. The aim of the project is to engage community and address challenges of climate change. The stove project under RDIS is a good example of many measures that can be taken to protect the environment. It is very important in reducing the cutting down of trees for firewood and charcoal. The president of the cooperative making stoves emphasized on the role of RDIS that “the project is of great importance as before we were very poor and now we

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<sup>137</sup> Many Heavens - One Earth, Our Continent, ARC, 2012.

are able to earn money and save for our future, we are able to make 10 stoves individually. Each Stove costs 10,000 Rwandan francs, we are able to buy our food, pay school fees for our children, pay health insurance and the cooking process has become very easy for us.” The project will have a good impact on environment protection as it will ensure the sustainable and equitable use of resources without degrading the environment or risking health or safety. It will prevent and control the degradation of land, water, vegetation and air, conserve and enhance natural and man-made heritage, including biological diversity of unique ecosystems, improve the condition and productivity of degraded areas, raise awareness and understanding of the link between environment and development, promote individual and community participation and promote international cooperation.

The workshop on the role of churches in addressing climate change highlighted challenges that churches are facing such as low community awareness about the risks of climate change which constitutes an obstacle to ownership of protective measures, the lack of knowledge and skills among community and church members in relation to climate protection, difficult cooperation between environment actors (churches, civil society, foreign agencies and government services), the lack of resources to implement projects to address climate change, the absence of measures of law enforcement in some countries, illegal exploitation of natural resources, including minerals and timber, land grabbing and the replacement of food crops by eucalyptus and a high development rate/economic improvements without taking account its consequences on the environment.

The participants in the workshop highlighted solutions to include and strengthen climate justice and environment protection in churches, develop a policy to make climate change a crosscutting issue and mainstream it in all church programs, cooperate with other churches and

institutions (NGOs, government etc.) in addressing climate change issues wherever possible, create a network of churches in the Great Lakes Region to promote climate justice and environmental protection, mainstream climate justice in our churches, facilitate the exchange and dissemination of relevant materials and networks on the youth action plan and environmental projects, implement similar projects like RDIS in other member churches as development projects, including training and support, and facilitate exchange of experiences with churches having such projects, promote conservation agriculture for land restoration through agro forestry, reforestation, and other modern land friendly farming techniques, integrate eco-theology/theology of creation and environment in theological and other training programmes including development programs.

PIASS, as a higher learning institution owned by Protestant Churches in Rwanda addresses some of the challenges. It has an undergraduate program of Natural resources and Environment Management that train Rwandese on the issue of environment protection and conservation. In addition, PIASS committed to develop and start a new program on eco-theology at master level.

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