**COP13 YOUTH FORUM 2017, ORDOS, CHINA**

**Introduction**

The UNCCD 13th Conference of Parties this year was held in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, China. I represented Kenya in the youth forum under Sustainable Environment Development Watch Kenya (SusWatch Kenya), an accredited Civil Society Organization based in Kisumu, Kenya. There is no greater privilege as being part of the selected team of youth representatives for the COP13 youth forum. My reason for saying this is that for the few days I was in China, every single youth I interacted with inspired me with their urge to fight climate change and land degradation for the betterment of tomorrow’s future. The hospitality we got as youth representatives was as well delightful.

**Ordos City**

**Day One; the Youth Forum**

Following an opening statement from the Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, young people should be champions in their various communities to protect, manage and restore degraded land. The land sector should be made attractive to youths and make them feel that indeed they are making a difference. Xu Xiao of the All China Youth Federation also highlighted the importance of mobilizing the youths to strengthen and share the green idea globally.

Youth representatives representing different countries from all over the world made presentations of their on-going projects and interestingly, these presentations were a reflection of what is happening in other parts of the world. Youth led initiatives were prominently effective following the amazing energy and input from other supportive youths.

Through this forum, the UN, as stated by Jiri, the Chief of Environmental Governance and Conventions Branch is breathing life to young environmentalists. When young people are given opportunities and support they can be catalysts for change, and the youth forum was a great stepping stone to achieving this change.
A panel discussion of experts from various fields was held and a key message from Oliver from Regeneration International was to engage youths in good story telling activities to involve those not affected by desertification. Funding was highlighted as a concern by Yang Liu, a research scientist from the Institute of Desertification Studies. She said she faces funding challenges since she is young. Youths should be given equal funding opportunities to prove their capability in land management and environmental management as a whole. The ‘lady married to the desert,’ Ms Hong Guimei of the China Youth Center for International Exchange promised to engage more volunteers from all over the world in her efforts to restore the Hobq Desert, where so far she has managed to plant more than 17 million trees.

**Panel Discussion**

The youth Forum was colourful and very interactive, especially when the participants were divided into groups to discuss and give presentations on how different sectors would contribute to promoting sustainable land management.

**Day Two; Open CSO Dialogue**

The Civil Society Organizations open dialogue was where one of the youth representatives, Andrew, presented the output from the youth forum. In his speech, he emphasized on the need to focus energies towards youth support. Delegates from my country were absent, but Jane Meriwas from the Samburu Women Organization in Kenya was present as a CSO member, which made me feel encouraged. I would definitely be glad if Andrew’s speech would find its way to the absent delegates from various countries, so as to enhance and push for implementation of youth’s suggestions in matters regarding sustainable land management.
Andrew's presentation

Day Three; Field Trip

The field trip to Yinkentala Desert, north of Hobq Desert brought memories from my China trip in May this year when I visited Kubuqi for the green Corps Program. The Chinese stakeholders are doing commendable work in combating desertification, with trees being planted along and around this desert. The desert has been turned into green land with 1,800 ha being implemented as national and regional forestry programs. In our small chit chats, everybody could not wait to get home and do something similar in their home countries. At least for me, this gave me more motivation to enhance my tree planting and school mentorship programs around the semi-arid regions of Kenya which are most vulnerable to desertification.
Conclusion

In a nutshell, I would definitely consider the youth forum as a huge success and would suggest a consistent follow up of the matters raised as well as having the youth participants as key contacts and benchmarks of the impact of the youth forum to their different countries. Governments from the invited youths’ countries should also be well represented, so that the output of the youths’ discussion is well delivered to the key decision makers.

Having a round table discussion on the main challenges facing youths in achieving sustainable land management may as well be incorporated in the next youth forum, so that youths are able to act as think tanks to come up with applicable solutions to these challenges and have a way to frequently update on the progress of the suggested solutions so as to know what works, what doesn’t and what needs to be changed.

Having attended this forum was an eye opener to me and I’m sure all other youths share this feeling. I am indeed very grateful to both UNCCD and the China partners for this amazing opportunity. It gave us an opportunity to understand the gaps and hindrances in achieving land degradation neutrality as youths and the probably actions we can take. It was also a great avenue to network and exchange ideas on making the world a better place for future generations. I look forward to positive feedback in the next COP youth forum regarding the discussions and suggestions forwarded in the COP13 Youth Conference.

By;

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