

Name: Likoko Eunice.

Essay: My story-Bliss or Tragedy?



The beginning

Growing up in one of the leafy suburbs of Nakuru town, our house sat on the edge of the town, with only five houses between us and the forest. We often took walks into the forest and picked a variety of delicious berries and tangy tasting roots . Often when my siblings and I fell sick we knew the herb to chew on and within no time, the pain would be gone. The town center and school were a mere one and a half kilometer walk from where we lived. We had the best of both worlds; the rich forest was our playground while we received quality education through the free government education system. As a child in an average Kenyan home, I focused on my studies because I was promised a bright future if I excelled in school, the academic motto in those days was, “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruits are sweet.” I definitely wanted to partake of those fruits.

As I buried my head in books and emerged top of my class again and again, I was blind to an important yet subtle reality. The reality of what was happening to my neighborhood, my country and the world. As a little girl, I saw the changes with my little eyes and marveled at the new developments, in fact I was mostly impressed. For example, I was impressed when instead of going to the market with baskets to carry our purchases every Saturday, we started buying polythene bags at the market; which were new, colourful, cheap and convenient. Finally! We did not have to carry my mother’s “kiondo”(traditional basket) to and from the market, and we could buy as many polythene bags as we wanted to separate the different things! And when it gets dirty or torn, you just throw it away and buy another one. Bliss!



Picture of kiondo basket made by “sisal sisters” in Kenya-picture by world of good

<http://worldofgood.ebay.com/Kiondo-Bag-made-from-Recycled-Plastic-Black-Handle/290415031372/item>



The school of life

In school we learnt about the wonders of development which came in the form of polythene bags, the convenience of cars as of self-actualization, the benefits of urbanization, the ills of rural places. I was told we had to study dilligently so that we could afford to build big houses, buy cars, buy the “good food” in supermarkets, be able to fly in planes, afford good clothes and shoes.....these things became synonymous to “the fruits of success”. I also learnt a lot from observing. I noticed, that all homes changed from having mixed vegetation front yards dominated by local grass species and cypress or bougainvillea fences, to having paved driveways and high block and cement walls. On TV and radio, I started hearing a constant urging by the leaders for us to embrace and encourage “development”. I saw new spaces opening up as the forests near my house were slowly cleared to create space to “develop” new houses for an emerging upper middle class.

In school, I also learnt new things about my country. I learnt that my country has many names, not just Kenya. Depending on what you are talking about it is also called a third world country, part of the global south, an aid receiving country, developing country, underdeveloped country, a poor country or a country with a weak currency. I soon learnt that these names were not flattering. I learnt that for my country to be called something else, it needs to embrace industrialization and urbanization ...no wonder our leaders were urging us to pursue development! I learnt that our rural dominated country was not the world’s idea of a country’s self-actualization and so we need to turn our little rural towns to ultra-modern cities with cutting edge technology, we need to increase our GDP and per capita income, and we need to build our economy so that we can compete with the ‘blue chip countries’.

At the back of my mind, I kept asking how come “they” are “ahead of the game”? Why were we “left behind”? What happened? What is happening? What went wrong? What needs to change? Here I encountered the stark reality of a series of historical events that set the stage for what is going on today. I also found many debates that have gone on for years, decades and which are still going on. A true can of worms! How come no one told me education is this complicated? How do you deal with these permutations of reality?

As I continued my academic journey, soon education in my county’s public schools was no longer free. Parents had to pay for their Children to get an education, and as the costs increased, many parents having not been to school themselves, did not see the point of struggling to pay school fees. Therefore many pupils were casualties of the system; they had to drop out of school. This did not make sense to me, wasn’t education the key to a bright future? If they drop out, what happens to their future? Do they miss the fruits of

academic success altogether? What next for these school dropouts? But this was not for me to deal with, for I must study! I must stay focused on the academia path.



What was I really learning? Is this what I should be learning?

Polythene bags! That's what I see when I look into the once clear waters of the rivers in my country. They are such an eye sore and a big problem; no longer a convenience. Recently, the minister for environment passed a law to ban the use of polythene bags and the polythene producing industries came out fighting. The law is yet to be implemented as the government negotiates with the company. How can there even be negotiation and it is evident that there is a problem that needs to be addressed immediately? Development was supposed to be good, we were urged to embrace it, and we did! How come it is not so good anymore? Why have polythene bags come back to haunt us?

Rumour has it that the world is warming up! I should have seen it coming, and done something about it! After all, I saw the forests near my house being cleared to make way for new houses.... but you see, I was busy in school, studying for my bright future. And it sure is going to be bright with the sun shining down brighter thanks to the depleted ozone layer. As I was busy in school, the berries and roots we use to pick on the forest went too, together with the forests where we took long leisurely walks in the evening. I wonder how I will describe them to my children, and their children. I wonder what they will think about my focus on academia as the forests slowly but surely disappeared.



The conclusion of the matter.

Education has been with us for long; both formal and non-formal education. What about the content of what I was learning? Was it pro or against sustainable development? Looking back at my school curriculum, I see capitalistic undertones all through the system- this is definitely in conflict with the sustainability agenda.

The question is; are we really learning what will give us a true well rounded bright future or are we learning things that enhance unsustainable development? If we are learning the good stuff that should enhance sustainable development how come things are not changing despite conferences, conventions, summits and

charters? Are we really serious about sustainability? Can we set aside personal and group interests and truly pursue sustainability?

"I do not believe in neutrality. Neutrality is just another word for accepting the status quo as universal law. Either you choose to go along with the way things are or else you reject the status quo."

— Myles Horton