

Global Network Will Monitor Marine Environment

THE morning of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's tirade at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, our own President heralded the imminent birth of "a new world".

In a moving address which received sustained applause, he told more than 100 heads of state assembled in the gilded Sandton Convention Centre that millions of ordinary citizens and especially the poor masses of the world were waiting to see if the summit would meet the challenges of sustainable development. These challenges had to be tackled with the understanding that the environment constituted "the irreplaceable sustenance of life".

Great capacity was now available to deal with the problems that were caused by humanity and the question had to be asked why this capacity was not being used, he said.

The expertise and mechanisms were in place to prevent the ravages of starvation, disease and wars -- yet millions were still dying because of them.

"Why do we have so much illiteracy when human knowledge breaks through the darkness. There is a chance of hope, so why is there despair?"

"Who are the beneficiaries here, and who and what is to blame? What should we do?"

For anyone who loves Africa, who values the struggle to get things right, these are haunting questions. Yet the resonance was false. For in the audience, just a few rows away, was Mugabe.

Here is a leader whose regime is diametrically opposed to sustainable development -- which is founded on the tenets of democracy, clean government, peace, upliftment of the poor and environmental protection.

Who are the beneficiaries? Who is to blame? When the answers are staring you in the face, haunting is just hollow.

And when this same demagogue stands up to rant about nothing to do with the issue at hand, and then is cheered by many of the assembled leaders and certainly most of the African leaders -- all the words just become sickening.

As damaging as the events around Mr Mugabe were, there were important successes at the summit. These included the agreement to establish globally a network of government and non-government agencies to monitor and police the marine environment, and the deal to cut by half by 2015 the present number of people without sanitation.

Green NGOs warn that, at the rate our water resources are being polluted and degraded, the sanitation target cannot be met. They warn that we are still not getting the sustainable development equation right; that there is too much emphasis in the summit declaration on short-term economic interests and not enough on long-term benefits for the poor and the environment.

Yet as serious as these imbalances are, there is hope that they can be righted, not least through the work of the indefatigable NGOs.

One of these bodies is the Seawater Forests' Initiative (SFI), which is centred on a unique project that could change the lives of millions of Africans.

The face of SFI is Dehab Faytinga, a beautiful singer from Eritrea, the dirt poor nation on the horn of Africa. In a standout performance at the summit Waterdome last week, garbed in gold and scarlet robes and plucking a krar, a traditional Eritrean harp, her soaring voice held thousands of delegates and media spellbound.

SFI is hoping that the power of Faytinga's music will communicate to ordinary people what the scientists have failed to do: that protecting natural systems can generate sustained income. And it seems to be working.

Founded on research by the Rockefeller Foundation, the organisation's work focuses on plants that grow on seawater. The most abundant of these is the mangrove (some of the best examples of which occur in the estuaries of the Eastern Cape, which Fatinga has visited).

SFI has initiated a 50ha pilot project on the Red Sea coast near the Eritrean capital of Asmara where peasants are being paid by the international donor-funded NGO to plant and manage mangroves for sustainable harvest.

The mangroves grow fast and provide timber for building and fodder for camels and goats. Indirectly with these benefits the people's incomes can be tripled.

It means being able to feed their children and having a future worth looking forward to.

But the most attractive economic feature of mangroves is that they live entirely on sea water so the habitual worry of the African farmer about the availability of fresh water is removed.

The exciting payoff is that the mangroves improve the soil, create a rich habitat for birds and animals and absorb carbon dioxide produced by industrial countries, helping to prevent global warming....

Yesterday was the 25th anniversary of the death of the much-loved apostle of empowerment, Steve Biko. What should we do, our president asks.

We should establish our own SFIs and throw government support behind them; we should march past the platitudes and practise what we preach; we should jettison leaders like Mugabe.

That's how sustainable development will be achieved and that's the way, the only way, that a new world can be born.