

**SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT, HON. FRANCIS NYENZE, EGH,
M.P, ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE WOOD CARVING
STAKEHOLDERS CONFERENCE AT MBAGATHI ON 18TH SEPTEMBER 2000**

Ladies and Gentlemen

Wood carving in Kenya was started in a very humble way by Mutisya Munge in the year 1918 after the Second World War. This happened at a little known Kambiti village in Wamunyu, Machakos District. The first carving that he made was a walking stick with a human face, which impressed the Local District Commissioner who ordered for more walking sticks. This was actually the starting of the trade. As more orders flowed in from that humble beginning the trade has grown from Wamunyu to all major centres in Kenya and to other parts of the region.

Today the industry has about 80,000 wood carvers supporting about 500,000 people. In total, by 1997 the industry earned about 1.5 billion Kenya shillings in the local and the export market, and thus the craft can be described as a very successful rural based industry. The industry is unique in that it is mainly rural based, using production factors from our rural areas namely labour and raw materials. It requires minimal investment and it is a leading rural based foreign exchange earner for the country.

In the current difficult economic situation in the country characterised by declining farm product, wood carvings prices seem to be relatively stable in the international market, a situation that the Kenyan carver need to exploit to the maximum. It is my hope that this conference will come up with strategic actions for the carver to benefit maximally from the trade.

In the recent past wood carving industry has received a lot of concern and interest among researchers, environmentalists, business community, conservationists and landowners because of the problems which are threatening to make it unsustainable. The interest of the groups I have mentioned is to put the industry into a sustainable footing. Studies carried out by National Museums of Kenya and KEFRI with support from WWF and UNESCO have shown that the industry is afflicted by a number of drawbacks. In spite of these problems affecting the industry there are many exploited opportunities. It is with this view that the People and Plants' programme of UNESCO has persistently attempted to put in place initiatives to put together the stakeholders in the industry to decide on its future.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Development achieved in the industry is enormous but there are trade offs and limitations that have to be addressed and very urgently. The woodcarving industry has been relying on selected indigenous species, Like, Mahogany, Olive, Mpingo and Rosewood whose growth rate does not balance with the rate of removal. The deficit accruing has caused overexploitation of those species. The over reliance on these species has resulted to biodiversity degradation and a threat to the environment. The end result has been a decline in the amount of wood supplied to the wood carving industry. All in all this is a serious threat to the survival of the industry, calling for urgent intervention measures to reverse the trend.

In the international circles carvings buyers have become aware of the negative impacts caused to the environment. This has prompted them to reject carvings from the over exploited species. Locally this has been translated into declining sales of woodcarvings in the world market. The decline has been enhanced by competition with cheap carvings from other parts of the world and other synthetic products. There is need to address this problem so that Kenyan carving can compete favourably with products from other parts of the world.

Coming back home all is not well within the carving industry where management of wood carving groups is heavily invested with inter-clan divisions and lack of cohesion which lack positive impacts required to enhance competition in the present day marketing. Indicators of this state of affairs is the rate of the current group and co-operative disintegrations into small groups and individual carvers which is not healthy for the growth and the existence of the trade. Other problems observed within the industry include low investment in personnel training, lack of marketing strategies and corruption. The resulting industrial environment forms a good base for middlemen to exploit the carvings producers. This conference is taking place at the right time before the situation goes out of hand by bringing all the concerned parties together to arrive at a concensus for the way forward.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is important to mention some of the intervention measures being adopted, such as the “good wood” campaign by UNESCO. The aim of this campaign is well known by most of you, calling for the use of alternative woods referred to as “good woods” These woods include the well known neem, Jacaranda, grevillea, blue gum and the mango trees which are successful agroforestry trees. Carvings from these trees are competing well with those

of the indigenous species in the local and international markets. The woods or the trees species are quick growing capable of meeting wood requires for the industry sustainably.

Efforts to put in place carvings certification system is a milestone in gaining entry into the world market while at the same time ensuring sustainable production of wood for carving under sound environmental management systems. The current pilot certification system in Malindi for neem will form a good base for the process, which can be replicated in the other parts of the country.

To ensure sustainable production of wood carving, planting of the trees used for woodcarving has been a major task within the “good wood” campaign. Carvers’ groups have started tree nurseries with the aim of planting trees in their farms. Discussions are at an advanced stage between my ministry and carvers groups for joint management of carving wood plantations within the government land. In this area my ministry promises full support.

Education is an important ingredient in the development of any industry. With this in mind efforts are being made to train carvers in effective wood utilization, marketing and business management. The few carvers so far trained are showing signs of adopting new designs and accepting to implement research findings relevant to their needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am optimistic that this conference will address all these issues and come up with lasting solutions to the problems affecting the industry looking at the experience and the academic qualification of the participants of this conference, I am convinced that this is the right forum to address the issues.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Before, I conclude may I now take this opportunity to thank you all for leaving your busy working places to come and participate in this workshop, and also thank UNESCO for organizing this important workshop.

With these few remarks, it is now my pleasure to declare this meeting officially open.

Thank you.