

**By Achim Steiner, UN Under Secretary General and UN Environment Programme (UNEP)**

**UNEP and the Green Economy – Four Decades in Development**

**Environment Ministers Meeting in Nairobi Will Mark 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

40 years ago in the Swedish capital city of Stockholm history was made at a UN conference on the future of humanity and the planet that would propel Kenya and its capital into the centre of international environmental affairs.

Amid rising concern over pollution over the air, the land and the seas; the growing loss of species and the dying of forests as a result of acid rain, governments agreed that a UN body charged with coordinating a global response to such challenges should be established.

Between June 1972 and the UN General Assembly that year, many countries lobbied to have this new environmental body including Mexico, India, the United States and the UK.

But in the end the Kenya won the diplomatic debate and in doing so became the first developing country to host a UN headquarters.

UNEP, as it became known, had its first headquarters in the Kenyatta International Conference Centre.

Black and white photographs taken on 2 October 1973 at the inaugural celebrations show President Kenyatta, flanked by forest rangers and game wardens, waving his signature fly whisk while 43 year-old Canadian Maurice Strong, UNEP's first Executive Director, stands to attention.

Two years later UNEP moved into its premises in Gigiri on the site of an old coffee farm where it remains to this day employing around 1130 local and international staff and acting as a hub for a strategic network of regional offices in Bangkok, Panama City, Washington DC, Geneva and Bahrain.

For many Kenyans going about their daily lives, UNEP and its work can sometimes seem remote.

It was originally set up to coordinate the rest of the UN system's activities on environmental issues and to provide the science to member states on emerging trends in environmental change.

The emphasis on science has perhaps been among UNEP's most important contributions that in turn has led to governments negotiating key global treaties to address emerging environmental crises.

The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone layer—the protective shield that filters out dangerous levels of the sun's ultra violet rays—is a case in point.

It became clear in the 1980s that certain chemicals used in products such as fridges to fire-fighting equipment were attacking the ozone layer. By 2010, this UNEP treaty had coordinated the phase-out of over 100 of these harmful gases.

Without the Montreal Protocol, atmospheric levels of ozone-depleting substances could have increased tenfold by 2050 which in turn could have led to up to 20 million more cases of skin cancer and 130 million more cases of eye cataracts, not to speak of damage to human immune systems, wildlife and agriculture.

Bringing forward the science and convening treaty negotiations continues to this day.

Only a few months ago, governments from across the world met in Gigiri to push forward plans for a global agreement on mercury—a notorious heavy metal that damages the nervous system.

The Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland was so called because hat makers once used mercury to strengthen the brims of hats and breathed in the fumes.

In the late 1980s, as the world was struggling to understand the implications of rising greenhouse gases in the atmosphere UNEP and the World Meteorological Organization established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Its scientific work has become the premier risk assessment and reference work for governments on the likely trends and impacts of global warming and the Panel's findings played a key role in the decision to establish the UN climate convention and its emission reduction treaty, the Kyoto Protocol.

Following the famous Earth Summit of 1992, UNEP was given more opportunities to evolve its work as an implementing agency of a new multibillion-dollar fund, the Global Environment Facility.

Kenya has been among several developing countries where maps of solar power and wind speeds have been developed that in turn are assisting the government and overseas investors to install renewable energy.

The expansion of Kenya's geothermal electricity potential in the Great Rift Valley has been made possible in part by a UNEP-led project to bring in new, more reliable and cost effective drilling techniques.

Since 2008, the organization has been championing the Green Economy as a way of generating development and employment but in a way that keeps humanity's footprint within ecological boundaries.

Kenya's energy policy of the past few years is part of that transition as is its new engagement on restoring and rehabilitating its ecosystems.

Part of the Green Economy work has been to assess and communicate to governments the multi-trillion dollar services that nature provides, but which until recently have been all but invisible in national accounts of profit and loss.

Here in Kenya, UNEP has partnered with the government to assess the value of the Mau forest complex, which over the past few decades has lost some 30 per cent of its cover.

It is estimated that the services this forest generates—water for around a dozen rivers systems that for example feed the Maasai Mara and Lake Nakuru; moisture for the tea industry and carbon storage—are worth in total up to \$1.5 billion a year to the Kenyan economy.

These estimates have assisted in tipping the balance in favour of restoration rather than degradation of this key natural asset.

Often large UN conferences can seem to outsiders like talk fests and certainly assisting over 190 nations to agree and to cooperate can sometimes prove frustrating.

But often the real benefits, especially in respect to environmental action of what nations agree only emerge years or even decades later.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, UNEP was asked to spearhead a partnership in order to accelerate a global phase-out of leaded petrol: Lead is especially damaging to the brain of infants and the young.

Since then around 80 developing countries including Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Vanuatu and several in the Caribbean have removed lead from transport fuels and only now are the enormous benefits emerging.

Scientists calculate that improvements in IQ, reductions in cardiovascular diseases, and decline in criminality are among the annual US\$2.4 trillion benefits linked to ridding the world of leaded

These economic benefits may prove to be even higher if other diseases and factors such as cancer and rising urbanization, where the impacts of lead pollution are higher, were brought into the calculations.

It is one example of how environmental measures and action also links directly to the social factors and issues of poverty, equity and livelihoods.

Kenya has benefited from hosting UNEP, but so too has UNEP benefited from being in East Africa.

The inspiration, determination, humility, humour, advice and support of someone like the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai has shaped this institution in ways that have built UNEP's confidence to go that extra mile and eschew the status quo.

So what of the future? As environment ministers gather in Nairobi for their annual meeting of the UNEP Governing Council in February 2012, all eyes are on the follow up to the Earth Summit of 1992.

Rio+20, taking place in June, may prove to be an opportunity where the Green Economy initiative is translated into a fresh and forward-looking way of finally realizing sustainable development for seven billion people, rising to over nine billion by 2050.

Some governments, including Kenya and Germany, are also signaling that the time has come to strengthen UNEP itself perhaps into a World Environment Organization.

40 years ago many of the challenges facing people and the planet were still theoretical today they are fast becoming reality.

The emergence of UNEP from Stockholm in 1972 was for some a surprise package—whether June 2012 will evolve the UNEP story onto a higher level, only time will tell.