

UNEP celebrates its 40th birthday

The United Nations Environment Programme Executive Director, Achim Steiner, looks back at the vital work of this organisation as it celebrates its 40th anniversary

FORTY YEARS AGO, in the Swedish capital city of Stockholm, a UN conference on the future of humanity and the planet was held. At this time there was rising concern about pollution of 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 co-ordinating a global response to such challenges should be established. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was born.

Many countries lobbied to host the headquarters of this new environmental body, including Mexico, India, the United States and the UK. Kenya won the diplomatic battle and in doing so became the first developing country to host a UN headquarters. UNEP began its life 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 900 local and international staff and acting as a hub for a small strategic network of regional offices in Bangkok, Panama City, Washington DC, Geneva and Bahrain.

UNEP's work

UNEP was originally set up to co-ordinate the rest of the UN system's activities on environmental issues and to provide the scientific knowledge to member states on emerging trends in environmental change.

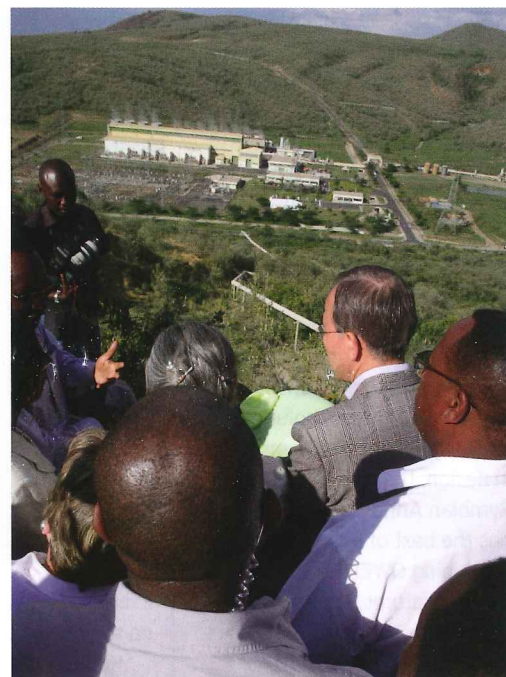
The emphasis on science has been among UNEP's most important

contributions, leading to the negotiation by governments on 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 and fire-fighting equipment were attacking the ozone layer. By 2010 this UNEP treaty had co-ordinated the phasing 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



1972-2012:
Serving People
and the Planet



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon listens to the explanation given by a technical expert during his visit to the Olkaria Geothermal Plant in Kenya.

Climate change

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 Organisation established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Its scientific work has become the premier risk assessment and reference body for government. The likely trends and impacts of global warming. The Panel's findings played a key role in the drive to establish the UN climate convention and the emission reduction treaty, the Kyoto Protocol.

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to human immune systems, wildlife and agriculture.

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

Green initiatives

Following the memorable Earth Summit of 1992, UNEP was given more opportunities to evolve its work in implementing a new multi-billion 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 organisation has been championing the Green Economy as a way of generating growth and employment in a way that keeps humanity's footprint within ecological boundaries. Part of that 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 river systems that, for example, feed the Masai 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.

So what of the future? 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 for the Green Economy initiative to be translated into a fresh and forward-looking realisation of sustainable development for the world's seven billion people (rising to over nine billion by 2050). Some governments, including Kenya and Germany, are also signalling that the time has come to strengthen UNEP itself, perhaps into a World Environment Organisation.

Forty years ago many of the challenges facing people and the planet were still theoretical: today they are fast becoming reality. The emergence of UNEP in 1972 was for some a surprise. We will have to wait and see what the future holds for UNEP in June 2012.

The real cost of fuel

At the **World Summit** on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, UNEP was asked to spearhead a partnership in order to finish off 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 Kenya 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 fuel.

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

UNEP's headquarters in Gigiri



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visits a Geo Thermal Plant in Kenya

