



Remarks

by

H.E. Mr. John W. Ashe

President of the 68th Session of the United Nations

General Assembly

High-Level Segment of the United Nations Environment Assembly

Opening Session

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Please check against delivery

H.E. Uhuru Kenyatta, President of the Republic of Kenya,
H.S.H. Prince Albert II of Monaco,
H.E. Dr. Oyun Sanjaasuren, President of UNEA,
Mr. Achim Steiner, UNEP Executive Director,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be part of the opening of the very first United Nations Environment Assembly, in my capacity as the President of the 68th session of the UN General Assembly.

Let me begin by saying that this occasion is the result of years of efforts – and perhaps for those who are more cynical about the work of the UN – it has taken years of negotiations and is long overdue, But there is no getting around the fact that now that we are finally here, there are monumental expectations placed upon this first – and I daresay – historic UNEA.

As I look across this Assembly, I see many familiar faces from my early days as my country's representative to UNEP. And for the young amongst us, that was back before the Internet, social media and smartphones – a very long time ago. But, it is precisely because so much is anticipated and needed from this crucial and historic meeting that all of us – the old hands and new voices- need to ask ourselves how can we ensure that this first UNEA assembly serves as a marker for the future of our planet.

Yes, our challenges are many and multiplying, and our resources sometimes seem strained and often diminishing, but there should be no doubt that our collective and individual wills and our creative energies can be harnessed effectively for a shared and universal post-2015 development agenda – one in which the health and well-being of our planet's environment are integral to the health and well-being of its inhabitants.

As a historic first, with all 193 Member States acknowledging the paramount importance of the environment to our human development activities, let us think of this United Nations Environment Assembly as an olive branch that calls for a halt to business-as-usual, destructive environmental practices and therefore a symbol of our shared commitment to an effective “peace building” process with our planet.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

This first session of the United Nations Environment Assembly comes at a historical moment of transformation and reconfiguration of the United Nations development framework. Yet the groundwork for this meeting was laid almost two years ago when world leaders decided at Rio+20 on the need for new development paradigm, a paradigm in which the wellbeing of people and planet are indivisible, and sustainable development for all and eradicating poverty are irrevocably intertwined.

In order to make this emerging concept of development more tangible, three (3) practical and transformational decisions were taken, which have resulted in ongoing processes that are now underway.

The first crucial task is defining a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs), supported by ambitious targets. These SDGs will build on the successes of the Millennium Development Goals and other existing internationally agreed development goals, while responding to new universal challenges.

The second is to identify appropriate means of implementation. This includes promoting an enabling policy framework and supportive global partnerships, strengthening the required human and institutional capacity, making relevant technologies available to all, and defining a relevant sustainable development financing strategy.

The third decision is to transform the institutional framework for sustainable development so that it is more balanced, representative, legitimate and effective.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here as part of that third decision. The establishment of the United Nations Environment Assembly as mandated by General Assembly resolutions 67/213 and 67/251, together with a reformed Economic and Social Council and the High-Level Political Forum are all important elements in the construction of a new architecture to deliver the re-envisioned development agenda.

With this Assembly, the United Nations system has for the first time in its history a truly universal inter-governmental authority for the environment, which is located in a country of the developing world. This body's mission is to lead and set the global environmental agenda, to coordinate the environmental activities of the UN system and to coherently integrate environmental considerations into the sustainable development agenda.

There are many reasons this first gathering is important, but foremost it is an opportunity to reflect on how the United Nations Environment Assembly can contribute within its mandate, to the global effort of defining the post-2015 development agenda and to consider some of the most important issues at stake.

For example, how can we enhance prosperity and ensure no one is left behind, while respecting the earth's life support systems, and building assets for the benefit of future generations? How can our new agenda promote sustainable investments in rural economies, support provision of basic services, and provide meaningful and decent employment? How do we enhance resilience and ensure inter-generational equity by restoring degraded ecosystems and ensuring a clean and healthy environment?

The high-level segment also provides a golden opportunity to hear from Ministers of Environment about how this Assembly can contribute to the work of our own UN general

Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), as well as their own national agendas in a synergistic and transformative manner. This is particularly relevant as the implementation and global accountability framework of the post-2015 agenda will necessitate an improved, coherent and cohesive institutional framework.

Member States and other stakeholders can also seize this chance to explore ways to strengthen and accelerate the full implementation of the Ten-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns (10YFP), as well as reflect upon how we can transition to more sustainable patterns of consumption and production. In this regard, developed and developing countries can offer valuable leadership in the achievement of that transition.

It is also welcome that Ministers have decided to focus their attention on the Illegal Trade in Wildlife. Such dialogue comes at a pertinent time, as last year the General Assembly proclaimed 3 March as World Wildlife Day, in recognition of the numerous contributions of wildlife to sustainable development and human well-being.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very much looking forward to hearing from Ministers and High-level representatives about the various ways environmental issues can be addressed in the post-2015 Development Agenda. And I encourage continued engagement in the negotiating processes currently underway in New York, which will eventually lead to the Third Conference on Financing for Development and the Summit of September 2015. I expect your work here to contribute to stronger outcomes for both.

I look forward to hearing from you, Honourable Ministers, during this first United Nations Environment Assembly, which provides a historic opportunity to set a new

agenda and a pattern of collaboration that is constructive and transformative and mainstreams environmental issues into the manifold ways we live, including the ways in which we do business and earn livelihoods.

As we commit to developing a shared post-2015 development agenda, let me conclude by saying that we cannot ever forget those who are NOT in the room today, especially those whose voices are not often heard or are frequently silenced because they depend on us to act effectively and collaboratively. Let us remember the heavy costs imposed on millions who are on the frontlines of environmental crises whilst also struggling with poverty, ill-health, disease, discrimination and a lack of access to basic services.

Much is expected of those who make history. As we work together to create this historic organization and to define its parameters and scope of future action, let us be bold and creative in our brushstrokes on this inaugural canvas. Working to ensure that this first UNEA delivers on the promise of a better future for all is not a choice but an obligation for all of us.

Thank you.
