

Pushing for a green economy and clean energy in Africa

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Africa is grappling with myriad environmental and climate challenges, from drought to loss of biodiversity, cyclones and plastics pollution. We spoke with the United Nations Environment Programme's deputy executive director, Joyce Msuya, on how African countries can mitigate some of these challenges and the opportunities that are available.



Joyce Msuya, deputy executive director, United Nations Environment Programme

It is about a year since you were appointed deputy executive director of UNEP, and for a while you acted as the executive director. What has this journey been like for you?

I joined UNEP in August 2018 and it has been a fulfilling journey for me. Given the absolute centrality of environment in development, in attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it's been great to see how the UN has played a leading role in many ways. For example, we recently released the Global Environment Outlook 6, showing that we are increasingly connecting the environment to the broader development issues.

What are some of the highlights of your time at UNEP?

A key highlight has definitely been the Fourth UN Environment Assembly in March 2019, which focused on the innovations that can help us achieve sustainable production and consumption. After five days of discussions, ministers from more than 170 UN member states delivered a bold blueprint for change, saying the world needed to speed up moves towards a new model of development in order to respect the vision laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Member states agreed to 23 non-binding resolutions covering a range of environmental challenges, including a more circular global economy; sustainable public procurement; addressing food waste and sharing best practices on energy-efficient and safe cold chain solutions. If countries deliver on all that was agreed here and implement the resolutions, we could take a big step towards a new world order where we no longer grow at the expense of nature but instead see people and planet thrive together.

I have a strong team behind me — the staff at UNEP and the rest of the UN family. As a woman from East Africa, it is a very humbling experience to serve in the organisation, and be based at UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, to work on environmental issues.

What are some of the major environmental challenges facing Africa today and how can they be addressed?

I would summarise the biggest environmental challenges facing Africa today in four categories. One is the impact of climate change, considering that most African economies still depend on the agriculture sector. The second is loss of biodiversity because this impacts food security and natural ecosystems. The third is energy, as many African economies are growing fast and require sufficient energy. Lastly, looking at the demographic trends, there is a lot of growth in urban areas with populations moving to cities. This brings challenges, including that of waste management.

Are there any opportunities?

There are exciting opportunities. After the Paris Agreement, there was a global commitment and political will to address climate change. We are currently working with African countries to help them develop national plans in mitigation and adaptation. On nature, next year there will be a big global meeting in China on the Convention on Biological Diversity, offering African member states the opportunity to shape the global biodiversity agenda by sharing strategies that are working well and can be replicated elsewhere. Africa is endowed with many hours of unobstructed sunlight; how can we promote more usage of solar energy and other renewables to fuel Africa's economies?

UNEP has been pushing for a green economy by promoting low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive policies. How can African countries tap into this?

Push for cleaner sources of energy. We are already seeing several developments in this. If you follow what is happening in South Africa, trying to move its heavy manufacturing industrial sector from being dependent on coal to cleaner energy...it is a slow process. Transition from bad sources of energy to renewables takes time. Then we have banning deforestation and making green economy plans. Countries like Ethiopia, Ghana and South Africa are moving in this direction. It needs ministers of environment to work very closely with ministers of finance to develop these plans. UNEP is using its convening role to help member states do this.

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What are some of the ways African countries can deal with the plastic menace?

Governments, citizens, the private sector and civil society all have a role to play when it comes to plastics. There are four ways that African governments and citizens can help with the menace. First is leadership and political will to actually put in place regulations to ban single-use plastics and promote reuse of smart plastics. The second is for the citizens to make smart choices, children telling their parents 'mama, papa, please don't buy plastics'. Consumer choices can influence the environmental footprint of plastics. Third, we need to celebrate and advance homegrown advocacy such as the "Flip Flopi," an indigenous innovation from Kenya where a boat has been made entirely out of plastics found on beaches. It recently sailed from Lamu to Zanzibar to raise awareness.

Lastly, partnerships with the private sector. If you look at good examples of where single-use plastics have been banned, there have been engagements between governments and the private sector to encourage them to find alternative and more sustainable ways to replace plastics bags.

Part of UNEP's role is to promote the sharing of these experiences. A number of countries in Africa, including my own, Tanzania, and also Kenya, are looking at how they can preserve the national parks to sustain the tourism industry and people's livelihoods. And finally, we need to see how we can address the plastic menace by introducing more circularity into economies. This is where capacity-building support for governments will be critical.

How is UNEP helping member states in Africa to achieve SDGs and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda? In particular, how is UNEP coordinating with pan-African organisations such as the African Union to address the effects of climate change?

UN Environment supports and showcases science-informed policies that have the potential to transform humanity's relationship with our environment. We also host global platforms – from the UN Environment Assembly to international financial networks to multilateral environmental agreements – that catalyse action. And we advocate, working with citizens across the world, to inspire change. However, we cannot do it alone because the scale of the challenge is huge but there are enormous opportunities to make a difference and so partnerships are critical. For political advocacy we are engaging with the African Union through our office in Addis Ababa. We provide policy advice, technical assistance and capacity building. We are working with NEPAD and talking to the East African Community to see how we can support the sub-regional and regional initiatives. I was in Cape Town, South Africa, earlier this year, with other regional bodies, to learn how countries develop green economic plans.

How is UNEP engaging women and youth?

We are engaging them at various levels as part of the intergovernmental process. Women and youth are a core part of implementing our programs. At the UNEA 4, we heard from many youth activists on why they are becoming impatient and demanded for action from us.

What is your message to African countries on environment?

Africa has a significant role to play when it comes to the environment. All these global challenges have an impact on the continent, hence the need to hear African voices at all levels in global forums. Also, incorporating and mainstreaming environment in all the activities at the country level is key as is translating these into actions. Partnerships are crucial: Africa is diverse, but we can build on that diversity to bring collective action. Our challenges cannot be solved individually. It takes a village to raise a child in Africa; it is going to take a village to solve our environmental problems.

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