

Environment "cannot be an afterthought" - UNEA-2

Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta has urged hundreds of key decision-makers from across the world to prioritise environmental action in support of economic and societal growth, at the opening of the high-level segment of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-2).



Image by 123RF

Over 170 countries, 120 represented at ministerial level, are represented at UNEA-2, where they are looking to drive action on issues ranging from the air pollution that kills millions of people every year, to the illegal trade in wildlife which is pushing species to the brink of extinction.

“Over the last two decades, we have seen, across the world, a movement emerge saying that the environment can no longer be a tertiary concern, that building a sustainable future cannot be an afterthought,” said Kenyatta. “Your presence at this critical convening brings momentum to that movement and amplifies the urgency of the issue we are discussing.”

Held at the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi, UNEA is the world's most powerful decision-making body on the environment. Other issues on the table include food waste, the world's natural capital and sustainable consumption and production.

“We are proud to have seen thousands of actions, people and initiatives congregate here over the years,” said UNEP executive director Achim Steiner, addressing the opening of the assembly. “At Rio+20, heads of state called for a new era in environmental governance, for a new environment assembly. You are that dream come true.”

United Nations deputy secretary-general, Jan Eliasson, said that action on all these issues under discussion was essential to implementation of both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

“The decisions you will take are critical for the well-being of this and future generations,” Eliasson told the gathering ahead of the commencement of negotiations. “They will have profound and lasting consequences.”

More than 1,000 delegates from across the world – including business and civil society representatives – are attending UNEA-2. Among those are Edgar Gutiérrez-Espeleta, minister of environment and energy of Costa Rica and the new president of UNEA-2; and French ecology minister Ségolène Royal.

“We must take energetic and robust decisions,” said Gutiérrez-Espeleta. “The time has come for ambitious proposals and bold solutions. We have a mission to generate a renewed world alliance.”

Wildlife

A particularly key issue at UNEA-2 is the illegal trade in wildlife, which is pushing species to the brink of extinction, robbing countries of their natural heritage and profiting international criminal networks. UNEP and partners – with the backing of celebrities such as Gisele Bündchen and Neymar Jr – on Wednesday launched a new campaign, ‘Wild For Life’, to engage the public in ending the trade.

Many of the speakers at the opening promised to back the fight against the illegal trade in wildlife and welcomed Kenya’s decision to earlier this month burn over 100 tonnes of poached ivory – the largest burn in history.

“(The ivory burn) was a very powerful signal indeed. On 30 April I signed a ministerial decree banning the import of ivory into France and called on Europe to do the same thing,” said Royal. “Courage is needed to stand up to powerful lobbies.”

Negotiations will continue until late today, 27 May 2016, when the resolutions agreed on will set the path for much of UNEP’s work for the next few years and provide momentum to early actions on achieving the 2030 Agenda and implementing the Paris Agreement on climate change.

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the world's most powerful decision-making body on the environment. The assembly holds the power to dramatically change the fate of the planet and improve the lives of everyone, impacting everything from health to national security, from the plastic in our oceans to the trafficking of wildlife.

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