

## OPENING CEREMONY

Sunday 15th January



The Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment opened this morning at UNEP Headquarters. 160 participants are present from all parts of the world, including 120 delegates from Trade Union organisations and federations representing more than 200 million workers from more than 154 countries. The participants started to discuss issues of common interest related to sustainable development.

In his welcoming address UNEP Executive Director Dr. Klaus Toepfer said that the Assembly was a unique platform for exchange with one of the largest and most important stakeholders groups in sustainable development, the trade unions and the workers they represent.

Dr. Toepfer referred to the present drought in Kenya, and said that beyond our solidarity with the people suffering during this tragedy, governments must be more pro-active and implement long lasting solutions, in which environmental issues have a role to play. In this connection, land-use, climate change and water were identified as very important issues for the meeting. In response to people who may wonder what Trade Unions are doing at UNEP, Dr. Toepfer said that social stability and health are always linked to the work of the Trade Unions. Dr. Toepfer mentioned that his grandfather was a miner who died of fibrosis. He expressed his appreciation to Trade Unions for their role in achieving social progress in his country, saying that at the time "there were no rights for the workers and their families". Dr. Toepfer said that the Trade Union Assembly was not a luxury, but a necessary meeting. UNEP is willing to do the utmost to implement the UN Millennium Development Goals, which are closely linked to the environment.



Jim Baker, Director of ILO's Bureau for Workers' Activities Department, expressed ILO's appreciation for the initiative and thanked UNEP for recognising the importance of Trade Unions. Noting that millions of workers are represented here, Jim Baker said that the Assembly was an exciting moment. The ILO came to Kenya, an appropriate venue for the event and a special place for the labour movement, with a large supportive team. COTU, a strong and independent organisation that is not afraid to express its views and represent the interests of its members, should be commended for its significant participation in the labour movement. As early as 1997 ILO and UNEP signed a Memorandum of Understanding on joint co-operation. This Assembly indicates that time is ripe to intensify co-operation. ILO brings its tri-partite governing structure, as well as some of the best standards in the world, to the table enabling Trade Unions to play an active role. Mr. Baker invited the Trade Unions to "bring the concept of sustainability to everything we do, and everything we plan for the future."



On behalf of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Dr. Maria Neira emphasised that the issue of health provides the most powerful thread to drive sustainable development as well as the Trade Union agendas. The WHO is ready to provide supportive technical expertise. Dr. Neira announced that the WHO would soon publish a report showing that 25% of diseases in the world are linked to environmental factors, and that 13 million fatalities could be avoided each year if we worked together to promote environmental health. Dr. Neira said that at the World Health Assembly in 2007, a new plan for healthy workplaces would be considered, with the intention of agreeing to develop minimum standards.



The General Secretary of the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), Willy Thys, said this was a particularly important moment, with the first formal relation between UNEP and the labour movement, establishing the arrival of Trade Unions in the fight for sustainable development.



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Thys, this is extremely important, because within the neo-liberal globalisation, enterprises facing competition seek to reduce costs, and the first cost affected is jobs. North-South transfers often have tragic consequences for the environment. Industrialised countries have a tendency to consider poorer countries as their dustbin. Mr. Thys mentioned the current example of the French decommissioned aircraft carrier "Clémenceau" which is currently sailing between France and India for dismantling. Willy Thys expressed his belief in a different type of globalisation, one based on solidarity. Mr. Thys recognized that the Trade Union movement was not too keen to address environmental issues in the past, but have now become long term collective responsibility.

The General Secretary of ICFTU-AFRO, Andrew Kailembo stated that the participation of the Trade Unions in this programme is a demonstration of success. Andrew Kailembo said that the first step towards sustainable development should, in his view, be social dialogue between workers and employers. In order to fight poverty workers need to organise themselves to protect the environment.

They must be aware that our existence is going to be more fragile if we continue to destroy the environment. Andrew Kailembo said that common sense requires that we unite our efforts and work together to protect the environment and future generations. He pointed out that natural resources from Africa (fisheries, timber and minerals) were being exploited at an unprecedented rate. "If we continue, and if developing countries are to consume the same level as the North, we will need eight more planets to provide resources to 8 billion people in 2050." Pointing out that environmental issues are increasingly affecting Africa (extreme weather patterns, solid wastes management, air pollution, lack of sanitation), Andrew Kaliembo said that this Assembly should help reinforce their fight against environmental disasters.



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The final speaker was the honourable Prof. Kivutha Kibwana, Minister of the Environment of Kenya, who stated it was a good challenge to deliberate on the relation of labour and the environment, and confirmed high expectations for Assembly outcomes. Mr. Kibwana said the Business community often does not pay attention to the environment because of alleged higher costs, as evident in Kenya. Even if costs are cut in the short term, these will be higher in the mid and long term, if care for the environment is not ensured. Mr. Kivutha Kibwana said that Trade Unions could play a role by calling attention to processes that degrade the environment. In Africa, as in other developing countries, there is often a perception that one can damage the environment with impunity. Trade Unions could remind us that this should not be done. There are people and companies who know what they do is harmful, but who may not be fully committed to full disclosure. In circumstances of this kind, labour can play a role. The quality of the environment will say a lot about how developed we are. In a positive way it is an indicator of our civilisation.

