

Nairobi is a key city in this process of revitalizing the UN. The historic Women's Conference held here in 1985 produced the landmark "Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for Women to the Year 2000". Since that conference, women's issues have been one of the few consensus items on the UN agenda.

Nairobi is the headquarters of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT) which grew out of the Vancouver Conference of 1976. The very nature of its work and projects exemplifies the central importance of environment.

Nairobi's importance will grow because the UN Environment Programme is also headquartered here. Sixteen years ago, at the time of the Stockholm Conference, some observers may have considered the environment as merely a fashionable issue. Today we know that environmental issues are central and urgent - as important as arms control, as challenging as the eradication of disease. UNEP has been central to an awakening global consciousness, not only of the importance of environmental concerns, but of their impact on every decision we take and on its consequences.

Actions we began innocently have had implications no-one thought to anticipate. A wide use of chlorofluorocarbons threatens to destroy the ozone layer. One molecule of chlorine set free can destroy thousands of molecules of ozone. As the ozone layer, which affords protection from the sun's ultraviolet rays, gradually disappears, the dangers to aquatic life, the risk of skin cancers and the prospects of reduced crop yields all increase. The warming of the globe's climate, accelerated by the enormous volume of pollutants discharged into the air, increase the risk that fertile agricultural areas may be turned into arid zones. With receding polar icecaps and alarmingly higher sea levels, shorelines may disappear. Great cities like San Francisco and Mombasa could be at risk.

In the name of economic development, the rate of extinction of plant and animal life is increasing. Tropical rainforests contain, at a minimum, half of all the earth's species. Yet, present trends of forest destruction are estimated to spell extinction for 750,000 species in the next twelve years. The 2000 tropical forest plants identified as having cancer-fighting potential are among the species the world might irreversibly lose.

These are genuine world problems. But they are national problems too.