

22 March 2019

RE: Networking at the United Nations Fourth Assembly on the Environment (UNEA-4)

The DRFN is part of the Regional Sustainability Network (RSN), which is an HSF-Kenya initiative that was launched in September of 2018 and this project will run from 2018-2020. RSN is comprised of various institutions from the civil society sphere currently representing eight countries from sub-Saharan Africa. This network aims to contribute towards achieving of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement through:

- Enabling a strategic, innovative and efficient information exchange between actors in Africa in the thematic area of Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability
- Establishment of a database that showcases new and ongoing initiatives and partnerships in the area of Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability and maps these partnerships
- Capacity building of partner organizations for active and innovative future design

The UNEA-4 platform thus presented itself as the perfect opportunity to achieve some of these objectives mentioned above. Three partner countries (Namibia, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo) were represented by their various members this year's United Nations (UN) Assembly which was themed around finding innovative solutions for the world's environmental problems, the hashtag for this event was #SolveDifferent. The DRFN was presented by Bernadette Shalumbu-Shivute.



Figure 1 RSN members attending UNEA-4



Figure 2 Attending breakfast meeting on climate financing



Figure 3 RSN members at the UN Headquarters

Brief history of UNEA

The first United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was held at UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, from 23-27 June 2014. The overarching theme of the session was “Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 Development Agenda, including sustainable consumption and production.”

The second session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-2) took place from 23-27 May 2016 in Nairobi, Kenya. Its overarching theme was on Delivering on the Environmental Dimension of the

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the policy review session entitled Healthy Environment, Healthy People.

The Third Environment Assembly (UNEA-3) took place in Nairobi 4-6 December 2017 under the overarching theme “Towards a pollution-free planet”. The Assembly addressed five sub-themes: Water Pollution, Land Pollution, Marine Pollution, Air Pollution, and Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste.

The Fourth Environment Assembly was held in Nairobi 11-15 March 2019, focusing on the theme “Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production”.

Given the DRFN’s strategic position as the National Implementing Entity for the Adaptation fund <https://www.adaptation-fund.org/ie/desert-research-foundation-of-namibia-drfn/> it was of utmost importance for the institution to get a global perspective of what people around the world are doing in order to solve their various environmental challenges. We have realized that the innovative wheel in Namibia needs to “oiled” and thus through our participation at the Assembly, we also shared some of these ideas with our followers through our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/DesertResearchFoundationOfNamibia/>).

This allowed for more interaction with our followers as well as the broader Namibian public on how we can tackle some of our own problems innovatively.

What stood out from the sessions attended?

Entertainment industry:

The entertainment industry reaches out to millions of viewers through platforms such as television, art, radio, livestreams, YouTube, tv/billboard commercials and thus it was eye-opening to view clips from different movies and commercials where the environment problems were brought to the forefront as “shock therapy”. Everyone is tuned in onto some or another medium of entertainment, and if this vehicle can be used more strategically to influence human behaviour; it be used as a call to action medium and drive urgency which is often lacking.



Figure 4 Artistic impression of waste pollution

The Fashion industry:

This industry has always been about the latest trends and looking on point but there is very little in your face information out there on the negative impacts that the fashion industry has on the environment. The fashion industry is one of the biggest consumers of water and largest generator of wastewater. During this year’s Assembly, a sustainable fashion alliance was launched where the industry aims to become more conscious of its impact on the environment and investigate other means of producing garments that still look good but have no or minimal impact on the environment. The industry show-cased different items made from upcycled clothes, plastics, wastewater as well as fibres made from organic cotton as natural cotton is being phased out and timber as an alternative to the traditional fibre-based products. The industry has been synonymous with the slogan “what your clothes say about you” and this has now been eco-modified to “what you say about your clothes”.



Figure 5 Recycled leather



Figure 6 Recycled plastics made into sequins

The tourism sector:

Tourism is another sector that has a negative footprint on the environment given that people normally travel long distances to get to their destinations (offsetting carbon footprints); tourists tend to naturally waste a lot of water, electricity and food and most establishments do not know how to handle their wastes (solid and wastewater). What stood out was the stringent accreditation process larger hotels and smaller establishments must pass, for them to be certified as eco-friendly hotels, offering “green holidays”. These establishments also must also source their food in a sustainable manner which is often challenging but can be done. Some of the hotels have banned plastic bottles in their conferences, the use of single-use plastics as well as the re-use of towels as interventions to reduce their environmental footprint.

Plastic pollution:

Plastic pollution specifically of the oceans is a hot and trending topic globally because the marine habitats are suffocating in plastics and truckloads of waste is washed ashore on beaches on a recurring basis. As a first resort to stop plastics from reaching the oceans, most countries have banned the production and use of single-use plastics, there is also lot of movement towards cleaning up the beaches and the oceans and many individuals have also showcased different innovative solutions that they have derived from turning trash into treasure and one such example is of the “flip-floppy boat” that was made entirely out of discarded flip-flop slippers which sail last year off the coast of Zanzibar.



Figure 8 The flip-floppy boat



Figure 7 Illustration of the boats' journey

Faith and the Environment:

Faith4Earth brought together leaders from various faith-based organisations who shared how they are using their position in society to advocate for a sustainable earth; based on their teachings and beliefs. Here one heard of the various biblical environmental scriptures that have been incorporated into religious teachings, how planting of trees has been incorporated into religious ceremonies, how food for mass gatherings is cooked using solar energy, how growing food for large gatherings is so much more sustainable and how a walk through a park, the touch and feel of sand and grass beneath ones feet as well as the air we breathe can be used as relaxation and healing of one's mind, body and soul.

Forests and their ecosystem services



Figure 10 An app that measures timber specs

Forests were showcased as alternatives for fibres used in the fashion industry. Others showcased digital and cloud-based technology used to measure and quantify the amount of forests being harvested as well as to calculate the DNA footprint found in forests and such tools can be used in Namibia as well to quantify the amount of timber that is being harvested currently and of which the exact quantities are unknown.



Figure 9 A web based products that maps DNA footprint of forests



Figure 11 How tree becomes fibre



Figure 12 Different production stages

The Circular Economy

The circular economy was the key word around the Assembly with many speakers calling for an end to the linear economy as a way of doing business and rather urging specifically the production industry to start doing business as unusual. This means that when a product is produced it must have multiple life-cycle stages and value chain additions and ending up at the dump-site or in the oceans does not fit in with this approach.

The Green Economy

The Green economy is dependent on the environment and there is no production on a dead planet! Green jobs are also governed by international labour standards as set out by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and what is clear is that there will be no lasting peace without social justice but ultimately without the planet there will be no jobs.

The Innovative Expo

The Innovation expo showcased some innovative approaches on what different companies and institutions around the world are doing to #SolveDiffent and some of these have been published on the DRFN Facebook page.

Being a civil society organization, we fall under the major groups umbrella and as such we had open access to all the sessions that were organized by the civil society unit which also provided an opportunity to network with other civil society members. Being at the Assembly has also allowed one to look at the environment from a holistic point of view, as opposed to the view previously held from working in specified sectors of the environment and through engagements with various persons one is inspired to make a change, however small.



Figure 13 This mat is made is recycled plastics

Going forward

The DRFN through submission of concept notes for funding will identify some these innovative ideas which can be localized to solve some of the pertinent environmental problems through various funding mechanisms and partnerships. What has been observed is that a lot of the initiatives were undertaken using various partnership agreements as well as a crowd-funding model; something that is not too common in Namibia. It is the aim of the Foundation to explore that avenue as we set out to #SolveDifferent using the business as unusual approach.

The DRFN wishes to thank HSF-Kenya as well as HSF-Namibia for the opportunity to network and engage on an international platform.