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The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution

UNEP at Fifty

By: Maria Ivanova

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UNEP at Fifty*

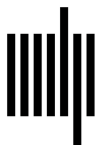
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FOREWORD

Ambassador John W. McDonald

The only way to solve a conflict at any level of society is to sit down face to face and talk about it.

—Ambassador John W. McDonald (1922–2019)¹

I am delighted that Dr. Maria Ivanova took the initiative to share with younger generations the actions taken by the members of the United Nations at the UN Conference on the Environment in 1972 in Stockholm and which led, in the fall of 1972, at the UN General Assembly in New York, to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), located in Kenya.

This is a timely and much-needed book in which Dr. Ivanova rediscovers and captures the beginnings of UNEP trying to grow as fast as possible to fulfill the expectations of the global community, but soon also experiencing the effects of a fast-changing world. Confidence and mistrust, successful implementation and misinterpretations of UNEP's mission have alternated over the years. As governments change and national interests are redefined, facts are forgotten or transformed, alternative narratives set in, and conventional "wisdom" takes the place of historical accounts. The creation of the United Nations Environment Programme is just that kind of historical occurrence that has lost its vivid color and has been replaced by a "deficiency by design" narrative that is simply incorrect.

Dr. Ivanova has an exceptional understanding of the ideals, hopes and urgent needs regarding the protection of the global environment ever since they rose into the conscience of world leaders in the late 1960s. She guides us through a complex reality over half a century to gain a better understanding of UNEP's creation as well as its efforts, activities, and changes, as well as governments' responsiveness, or lack and manipulation thereof, to UNEP's needs.

When I look back in time, only a few people around the world in the mid-1960s had begun to realize that something was going on in our global climate that required attention. I am appreciative of the United Nations and the members of its General Assembly for their understanding and taking the first steps toward action to protect the environment. I am grateful to the Swedish government for inviting governments to come to Stockholm in 1972. It was an astonishing gathering of developed and developing countries which agreed at the end of the Stockholm Conference on the creation of a new international environmental institution.

This new institution was based on a plan that I had been able to get through the United States bureaucracy over two years of preparation with all interested US Agencies and which was even supported by a forward-thinking Nixon White House. As Secretary of the US delegation at the Conference in Stockholm, I shared with half a dozen delegates from other countries my four draft resolutions for the creation of a new international environmental institution. The participants of the conference recognized the need for long-term global action and brought the same kind of strong desire and superb ideas to the negotiation table. In a spirit of positive cooperation, a plan of action to establish an environmental institution emerged and was accepted by the whole conference—with enthusiasm and by acclamation.

The UN had 132 members in 1972. No one imagined a UN with 193 members in forty-five years; no one could possibly imagine that UNEP would have to deal with immense political changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with erratic global economic, social, and financial growth, and with increasingly fast-developing technology. Small differences between countries became bigger, new and totally unexpected environmental issues arose globally and kept growing, ignoring political borders. The result is that our global environment began to show the grave ravages of our

daily sins. All this imposed incredible challenges on UNEP in the following decades. Yes, forecasts and future plans multiplied, but no one would dream of saying in 1972 or even in the 1980s that “climate change is the most pressing global challenge, constituting an existential threat to humanity.” Yet, that is what participants at COP24 in December 2018 concluded.

With a stroke of genius, Dr. Maria Ivanova convened for the first and only time in 2009 all five executive directors of UNEP along with eighty leaders in global environmental governance from around the world, across sectors, and spanning four generations. We met in Glion, Switzerland—face to face—to understand the past and to create a better and more efficient future with and for UNEP. I was eighty-seven years old at that time, and the experience moved me, inspired me, encouraged me, and empowered me. And it still gives me hope.

No institution, large or small, ever changes by itself. People are afraid of change, of what it might do to their job, their turf, their security. When change is proposed—as it must be again and again to save our global environment and ourselves—the most typical reaction is to sit tight and do nothing. Sometimes, however, a small shift does take place because of pressure and ideas from an outside source. This book, with its extraordinary rigor of analysis, depth of understanding, and scale of vision, is that source!

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