

Inauguration of The Children's Meeting Place

United Nations, Nairobi, 19-20 September 2001

REPORT

OPENING

The Inauguration of The Children's Meeting Place –a tree on the grounds of the United Nations– lasted for two days. The 250 participating children came from Nairobi, Western and Southern parts of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Finland and Sweden. All the children had made preparations for the inauguration. Such as writing poems, make drawings, practice dances, discussing what is important for the future and much more. (See attachment A: Program for the inauguration.)

The launch started with "Our Uniting Water Ceremony", where the children brought a cup of water and a hand full of soil from their homes as a gift to their Tree. Mr. Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of UNEP, gave the Opening Speech. (See attachment B)

After the opening the activities in and around The Children's Tree was like watching a swarm of happy bees! For the children it was important to make their Tree beautiful and to make their messages, longings, dreams and wishes as visible as possible. So the children climbed as high as they could in their Tree. It was not an easy task as the Children's Meeting Place is an Acacia - full of thorns! Adults on the ground watched the small ones climb higher and higher and admired their skills to avoid to be torn by the thorns. Suddenly adults on the ground could see the importance of the Acacia tree:

“The children's visions and dreams may seem impossible to make true but watching them move among the thorns we are all reminded that the young ones will find ways we adults have lost, forgotten or simply do not dare to find”.

Every child was interviewed about their hopes, dreams, fears and wishes for the future. Kajsa Dahlström, President of Globetree asked the children to tell their true concerns and not what they thought the adults would like to hear. The children took this to their heart and had the courage to speak up and dare to share their wounds with their Tree. The adults were deeply touched when they read the children's messages.

In the old times a Tree was a natural meeting place for sharing messages and make plans for the future. "When and why were these natural places of meeting replaced by tables and chairs? When and why was the circle under the tree replaced by one way communication from speaking stands?" These and many other thoughts were discussed in the inauguration program. Workshops came up in a natural manner. Young and old gathered in smaller groups to learn from one another. All the children also worked hard to make their part of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies. All over the place you could see children rehearsing songs, poetry, drama and music.

CLOSING

At the Closing Ceremony Ambassador *Inga Björk-Klevby*, Swedish Embassy in Kenya, Habitat Deputy Executive Director *Mr. Daniel Biau* and Chief Program Communication and Participation, Unicef, *Ms. Denise Shepherd-Johnson* addressed the children. Greetings, congratulations and encouragement that were sent to the children at The Children's Meeting Place from around the world was read a loud. They were from:

- *United Nation's Secretary General Kofi A. Annan*
- *HM Queen Silvia of Sweden*
- *Prime Minister of Sweden Göran Persson*
- *President of Global 500 Forum Marilyn Mosley*
- *Swedish Minister for the Environment Kjell Larsson and many, many more.* (See attachment D) The children's messages to their Tree and all greetings from around the world are saved in a special wooden box, which will have a place at the library of the United Nations in Nairobi.

Kajsa Dahlström, President of Globetree closed the inauguration of the Children's Meeting Place thanking all the children, accompanying adults, Speakers, Guests of Honor and sponsors for their trust, dedication and support. Then she continued:

"This is the beginning of a new way of meeting and learning from one another over boundaries of age, gender, profession, nations and culture. Under The Tree we are one family. Here we will have the courage to speak free and dare dream the impossible dreams. Here we are moms, dads and children learning together and finding the new ways for the future. I thank UNON for giving children from all over the world a place of meeting and for giving Globetree the honor to run The Children's Meeting Place".

BACKGROUND

On the World Environment Day 2000 Globetree received the 500 Roll of Honor Award from the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) for their work with children and the environment. Half a year later Globetree made the first connection to Habitat and was asked to participate in the program Managing Water for African Cities (MAWAC). As a beginning of the cooperation Globetree was invited to lead the Opening Ceremony of the 18th Session on the Commission of Human Settlements and to create a Future Vessel.

It was during this visit in February 2001, that Kajsa Dahlström first got the idea of a Children's Meeting place on the UN grounds –a place where young and old could meet and learn from one another. A draft program for a Children's Meeting Place was sent to UNEP, Habitat, Unicef and the Swedish Embassy. The Swedish Embassy in Kenya supported the idea all the way, no response was given from Unicef but UNEP Executive Director Mr. Klaus Töpfer sent a reply to the draft. He expressed a belief in the idea and that it was good but it would be too expensive and not enough space at the UN.

In April-May Kajsa Dahlström came back to Nairobi together with 25 children and adults from Sweden and the second Future Vessel in Kenya was created with 250 children from Nairobi at Bomas of Kenya. The Children's Meeting Place was further discussed in the Future Vessel and with persons at the United Nations. Mr. Tore Brevik at UNEP-CPI came up with the idea of a tree. A new draft for a Children's Meeting Place was drawn. A few months later Globetree received the positive answer from Mr. Töpfer: *“Globetree is authorized to run a Children's Meeting Place on United Nations grounds and UNEP will dedicate a Tree to the children!”*

It was decided that the inauguration was to take place in conjunction with UNGASS (The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children) 19-21 September 2001, New York. Globetree planned to have 2 children and 2 adults attending UNGASS and made plans to make a video connection between the children at UN Nairobi and UN New York. In the beginning of August, at the Stockholm Water Symposium, Globetree presented the idea of a Children's Meeting Place to an international audience and received great interest as well as financial support for additional 33 children to attend from neighboring countries; Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia. Financial support was also secured for children coming from rural areas of Kenya. Mrs. Mwaura from Loreto Convent Msongari Primary School in Nairobi became an invaluable partner with her connections to schools and centers in Nairobi and her help to find sponsors.

Globetree also contacted the official Swedish delegation to UNGASS and discussed the possibility of a videoconference between the children at the United Nations in Nairobi and

New York. The idea got a positive response and all practical matters were worked out and in place when the news of the terror attack of the World Trade Center struck the world. One consequence of the attack was that UNGASS was postponed. For a while it was also uncertain if the inauguration of the Children's Meeting Place in Nairobi could take place. Soon it was settled. UNEP and the Swedish Ambassador in Nairobi agreed that the inauguration of the Children's Meeting Place was more important than ever! In times of darkness light and hope must be cared for!

CHILDREN'S DECLARATION

All the interviews that were made with the children during the time under the tree, and other material as well, have been used to make a Children's Declaration. That is a document which contains conclusions and recommendations that will be used in the process of deciding how to work with The Children's Meeting Place in the future. This report is what happened, the Declaration is the continuation. (See attachment C.)

THANK YOU!

Globetree wish to thank the many who gave their support to the Children's Meeting Place.

- *All the children!* Your energy and willingness to share your visions, hopes, worries and ideas is the heart and the spirit of the Children's Meeting Place!
- *All adults accompanying the children!* Without your care and dedication to support the children this event would not be possible!
- *UNON!* Thank you for your precious gift – The Tree on the grounds of the United Nations! And special thanks to:
 - *Executive Director of UNEP Klaus Töpfer*, for your personal support and participation in the inauguration ceremony!
 - *Mr. Tore Brevik, CPI* – for guiding the vision of a Children's Meeting Place to The Tree!
 - *The Staff of UNEP - CPI!* You helped us with a lot of logistic matters! The documentary film material you handed over to Globetree will be invaluable when we edit a film of the inauguration!
 - *Habitat, Deputy Executive Director Mr. Daniel Biau*
 - *Unicef, Chief Program Communication and Participation Ms. Denise Shepherd-Johnson.* Thank you for participating in the inauguration Ceremony!
- *The Swedish Embassy and Ambassador Inga Björk-Klevby* – for your support of the idea of a Children's Meeting Place - all the way!

- *Loreto Convent Msongari School; Headmistress Sister Seraphine* for your trust in the vision and work of Globetree and *Mrs. Mwaura* for your dedicated support with the hundreds of practical obstacles and other matters which had to be solved along the road! Thank you also for your support to find sponsors!
- *All sponsors!*
 - *Relma – Åke Barklund and Rolf Winberg and Sida coordinator at the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in Nairobi - Lars Karlén*– for your grants to support travel and staying costs for children from Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Lake Victoria region, southern and central regions of Kenya!
 - *Swedish municipalities*
 - *Jambo Biscuits (K) Ltd,*
 - *Maneno Magazine,*
 - *Coca Cola Company,*
 - *Brookside Dairies Ltd,*
 - *YMCA Central, Nairobi*
- To the people around the world who sent messages and congratulations to the Children's Meeting Place; beyond those mentioned above, we also want to thank the *Swedish Ambassador in Washington Mr. Jan Eliasson, Lord Mayor of Stockholm Axel Wennerholm, Astronaut Loren Acton, Kosmonaut Dumitru Dorin Prunariu and many, many more - THANK YOU!*

ATTACHMENTS

- A. The program for the inauguration of the Children's Meeting Place
- B. Speeches at the inauguration
- C. Children's Declaration
- D. Children's Messages
- E. Participants