In June of last year, an important global conference was held to mark 20 years after the first sustainable development conference that was held in Rio De Janiero in 1992. The outcome document of Rio+20 and the main focus of the conference was to discuss "The Future We Want". The conference adopted two overarching themes of the International Environmental Governance and Green Economy in the context of poverty reduction.

Following up on Rio +20 recommendations, a number of local, national, regional and global consultations have been organized and conducted to discuss the Post 2015 agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the new shape for the global environmental governance. Rio+20 did not establish any formal processes with regard to the implementation of green economy. Rather, governments adopted it as a voluntary tool for achieving sustainable development.
The world as we knew it has already ended. If the Mayan Prophecy of end of time is to be interpreted, I would put it in the frame of the unprecedented increase of the population rate of the world, unprecedented increase in the use of the natural resources of our planet, the increase of earth temperature, the changing in lifestyles of the people, the governance challenges in many countries, food shortages for hundreds of millions, disparities between nations and within countries and many more. The world cannot continue at the same pace of over-utilization.

Green Economy might mean different things to different sectors and in different countries, so what does it mean?

In its simplest expression, a green economy can be thought of as one which is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive. Practically speaking, a green economy is one whose growth in income and employment is driven by public and private investments that reduce carbon emissions and pollution, enhance energy and resource efficiency, and prevent the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services. These investments need to be catalyzed and supported by targeted public expenditure, policy reforms and regulation changes. This development path should maintain, enhance and, where necessary, rebuild natural capital as a critical economic asset and source of public benefits, especially for poor people whose livelihoods and security depend strongly on nature.

Development is sustainable only when it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Moving towards a green economy can be an important driver in this effort. The environment in a green economy is seen as a determining factor of economic production, value, stability, and long term prosperity. As such, the shift to a green economy can be seen as a pathway to sustainable development, a journey rather than a destination, a process rather than an end.

The wealth of nations, as well as individuals, to a great extent, that we see today, is a result of the overexploitation of earth’s natural resources, over extraction of water, generation of waste that leads to biodiversity and ecosystems destruction. But, with this wealth, came inequity and exclusion of those deprived and most in need for natural resources for their daily living. Therefore, transitioning towards a green economy aims to increase access to basic services and infrastructure as a means of alleviating poverty and improving overall quality of life. Using green economy technologies, such as renewable energy, those 700 million people without adequate access to sustainable energy will have more hope and would receive this environmental service within their own lifetime.

However, it is not technology alone that is needed, but also the supporting legislative and governance systems that are necessary to remove externalities and provide incentives for green growth, green behavior and green lifestyle.

UN Environment considers sustainable consumption and production as synonymous to green economy. Social behavior, of corporations and individuals, is a key driver for sustainability. Sustainable consumption and production is primarily focused on increasing resource efficiency in production processes and consumption patterns. In practice, work towards achieving a green economy and sustainable consumption and production are mutually supportive, covering macro and micro interventions that require change in policy and regulatory instruments, investment and business operations, as well as behavioral change in society.

UN Environment leads 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production is a Global Framework for Action to enhance international cooperation to support regional and national initiatives accelerating the shift towards sustainable consumption and production in both developed and developing countries.

UN Environment has also announced the launch of the International Sustainable Public Procurement Initiative (SPPI) during Rio+20. Supported by over 30 governments and institutions, the SPPI aims to scale-up the level of public spending flowing into goods and services that maximize environmental and social benefits.
One of the major challenges facing the world today is employment and in particular youth employment. Therefore, development strategies must think of innovative ways to involve youth in the decision making process, develop specific programmes that can mobilize the potential of youth towards a better future and create decent jobs for the hundreds of millions of them who are seeking better and sustainable lives. A green economy creates jobs in a wide range of sectors of the economy as new markets emerge and grow, such as in organic agriculture, renewable energy, building retrofits for energy efficiency, public transportation, reclamation of brown-field sites, and recycling, among others.

During the First Universal Governing Council session of UN Environment, the Programme of Action on Green Economy (PAGE) has been launched. This 7-year programme responds to Rio+20’s call for the UN system to support countries interested in pursuing green economy policies. It will deploy the expertise of four UN agencies – ILO, UN Environment, UNIDO, and UNITAR – to progressively assist a total of 30 countries in their efforts to embark on green economy pathways. The collective endeavor ranges from mobilizing social awareness and providing specialized training to identifying critical bottlenecks, formulating and assessing policy options, and enabling policy implementation for greening the economy. The programme also includes global and regional level capacity development, knowledge creation and sharing, and high level policy dialogues, all to enrich and strengthen country level assistance.

PAGE aims to provide comprehensive and coordinated support and to closely link it with existing structures and processes in the countries, bringing in relevant expertise of other agencies and building on ongoing cooperation among country initiatives.

For the Arab region, that faces a unique set of challenges, the implementation of green economy will need to be tailored to regional circumstances and address key economic, social and environmental challenges, which vary significantly between countries. It will also need to take advantage of regional opportunities and competitive advantage, which may manifest in sectors such as energy, water and food through the development or deployment of renewable energy technologies, water management technologies or sustainable agriculture.

UN Environment has been working with a number of Arab Countries, as well as with the League of Arab States, on launching green economy across the region. While UN Environment recognized that much has already been done in a number of countries to green their economies, these efforts have been ad hoc and are considered mainly initiatives that do not follow a structured, comprehensive green economy strategies. While these initiatives do respond to country future visions, they remain less than the potential that exists in the region.

Countries such as Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, UAE and Tunisia, have either initiated national level green economy potential studies or sectoral analysis, or have embarked on mega green initiatives such as the use of renewable energy, resource efficiency, sustainable cities, sustainable transport, etc. The potential of green economy is humungous due to the availability of receptive sectors, essential demand for limited environmental services and the political will. For example, the Arab Forum for Environment and Development report estimated that spending US$100 billion in greening only 20% of the existing building stock in the Arab countries over the next 10 years is expected to create 4 million jobs.

The Arab region is a diverse region in terms of its geo-political and economic set up. While countries of the Gulf enjoy abundance of energy resources, they lack other environmental services such as water that in turn requires energy to be produced for domestic, industrial as well as agricultural purposes. Water, is also necessary in this region to produce food and maintain biodiversity. Thus, the food-water-energy nexus is of paramount importance here.
While other Arab Countries such as Lebanon and Sudan enjoy, so far, abundant water resources, they lack access to sustainable and affordable sources of energy that do not burden the country’s economy. Countries such as Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia have a mixture of challenges and opportunities that make green economy options very much a transformational need.

UN Environment, with the Economic and Social Council for West Asia, is working with the league of Arab States to conduct a comprehensive study on the investment potential in the Arab States region. This study will identify sectors that can benefit from greening policies and will provide policy options to decision makers to adopt green decisions to achieve sustainable development.

There is a lot of room for regional cooperation to achieve national development goals. The solar energy project of the Sahara is just one example of such potential. However, integration, cooperation and collaboration on standards, markets, incentives, taxes, transportation, etc. are all needed measures to help the region achieve better development goals that will not been possible had each country acted alone.

The transformation to green economy is the right choice to ensure a sustainable future. This transformation would need a paradigm shift in the way we manage our environmental resources and the way we treat our only planet.