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Uniting Nations: The UN at a Crossroads

An Interview with Achim Steiner

The forthcoming release of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the critical climate conference in Paris make 2015 a seminal year for the global future. Allen White of the Tellus Institute talks with United Nations Environment Programme Executive Director Achim Steiner about how the international system can rise to the challenge of climate change and, more broadly, adapt to the sustainability imperatives of the twenty-first century.

The United Nations will soon release a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to follow the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which come to an end this year. What role has UNEP been playing in the SDG process?

Our involvement with the issue of sustainable development dates back to the UN Conferences on Environment and Development in Stockholm in 1972 and Rio de Janeiro in 1992. UNEP, under the leadership of our late deputy executive Angela Cropper, was active in pushing for a shift away from the pillar approach to sustainability—in which environment, society, and economy are viewed separately—to the triple helix model that recognizes the interdependencies of environmental, social, and economic change. A transition toward a green economy requires breaking down these artificial boundaries and recognizing that poverty eradication, environmental sustainability, and social well-being must be a part of a unified agenda.

UNEP's involvement with the SDG process follows logically from this paradigm shift. In our recommendations to the SDG Working Group, we have emphasized the principles of universality and integration. We stress universality because sustainable development is not only a developing country agenda—it is premised on actions in every country, community, and economy. And we stress integration because the goals should not be treated as discrete issues, but instead require a unifying vision and plan for action. We have been engaged with environmental ministers worldwide, encouraging them to play a more active role in their respective national

governments, and with the broader environmental community, working with them to frame the SDG agenda.

Do you see the issues of accountability and enforceability as more prominent in the SDGs than they were in the MDGs?

I think the SDGs, by virtue of their universality, will not satisfy those seeking a treaty text that binds countries to enforceable targets. However, heads of state, ministers, and citizens of every country will commit to a global agenda in which all parties have a responsibility for moving toward a sustainable twenty-first century. The value of the targets and indicators is that they serve as a reference point for business, civil society, and individual governments for short and medium-term action. In that sense, the accountability associated with a globally negotiated process does to some extent exist, and thus monitoring will have an important role to play. But rather than look to international enforcement models, we should build on domestic accountability mechanisms. We see these in action when citizens mobilize within their sovereign jurisdictions, when parliaments interrogate their executive, and when citizens seek judicial recourse to ensure that their country is implementing its commitments. I hope that the SDGs will empower such actions because it is there, at the local and national level, that the greatest form of accountability is likely to occur.

Here at GTI, we talk about a global citizens movement—what it would look like and how to catalyze it. Your description of the SDGs suggests that they can play an important role in empowering citizens to take such initiative.

We need a compact for the 193 sovereign nation-states and 7 billion people to work toward a common goal informed by, on one hand, scientific imperatives and, on the other, the realities of where people can and do take action. A global reference point can empower the citizenry not just to go to global conferences and UN meetings, but to carry that agenda to a local district, a local government, or a national parliament. There is a continuum of accountability. The closer you come to where citizens live and exercise their power, the more likely the SDGs will serve as an instrument of accountability.

A recent report by UNEP argued that we will need to achieve zero net carbon emissions by 2070 to avoid catastrophic climate change and, moreover, that the uncertainty that we face is not scientific, but political. What are your thoughts on this issue of political will?

Those who look at the science today and conclude that the world is doomed should take a more historical perspective. Twenty-five years ago, only a small group of scientists hypothesized about the causes and consequences of climate instability. But today, climate change is the single most powerful driver of global change and scientific innovation across numerous components of our economic system—energy, infrastructure, transportation, and so forth. I cannot think of another example in the history of humanity where, in such a short period of time, we have had to deal

with a planetary change phenomenon of such far-reaching consequence.

The report is not a doom certificate for humanity, but rather a contribution to sharpening the debate about how we must respond to the climate challenge. It says that we can manage this transition, but we must realize that we will do it either by design or by default. If we start now with the 2020, 2030, and 2050 targets, we have a reasonable chance of staying within the 2°C target necessary. But if we continue to delay, such a transition becomes more chaotic and more reliant on betting and hedging. And that is an unjustifiable risk profile in the face of our current opportunity to act.

Look at how the story of renewable energy over the past few years turned an energy paradigm on its head. More than half of the energy infrastructure added to the grid last year was renewables. This would have seemed like a futuristic vision a mere ten years ago.

The climate change narrative is changing quickly from “Is it true?” or “Is it bad?” to a realization that the climate challenge is also an opportunity to deal with multiple problems at the same time. The narrative is no longer one of an inescapable disaster, but one of risk and opportunity. We as human beings have the ability to assess risks and to act without perfect knowledge. Risk is something we deal with every day. Climate just happens to be a profound and consequential risk that demands fundamental changes.

In regard to the risks and opportunities, a major stumbling block in the last several climate negotiations has been North-South differences. Do you expect to see a resolution in the Paris talks next year? Do the recent US-China bilateral handshake and the Lima Accord offer real hope?

This “handshake” comes alongside a renewed willingness of Europe to commit itself to a target and a post-Copenhagen series of national responses that have taken us well beyond where most governments agreed to go back in 2009. Even in the absence of a strong Copenhagen agreement, the realization of threat and possibility has inspired action.

The issue of inequity and perceived hypocrisy will not disappear because our current global and national governance systems still shape the nature of plausible collective agreements. Countries will still be judged with a degree of skepticism on whether or not they are doing their fair share. However, the rather simplistic narrative of five to ten years ago that developing countries do not recognize the seriousness of the threat and are not willing to act is disappearing. Just take a look at what countries like Brazil, South Africa, and China are doing in green energy. Combined with the deal between the United States and China, these actions attest to a shift among developing countries that they realize that climate change is a major threat to all nations, that they are ready to act, but that they will continue to bargain for a better deal in the context of an international agreement that requires them to make binding commitments.

Is it possible that the US-China agreement will produce an unintended, adverse reaction wherein countries reject the global structure of the UNFCCC and, instead, pursue bilateral arrangements?

The temptation may be there, and part of that logic has also brought major emitters together in dialogue. Major emitters can be the impetus for a global framework without which we will not succeed in addressing climate change, but you cannot disenfranchise the majority of countries out of a crude sense of political Darwinism. Here, it is important to realize that even if we rely on national or bilateral actions over the next decade or two, their scope and ambition will likely be greater if they are embedded in a global framework.

The existence of the UNEP Finance Initiative and the recent Inquiry on Sustainable Financial Markets show that UNEP believes that finance is pivotal to ecological well-being. Many agree with that proposition, but others see financial markets—based on limitless returns to invested capital—as part of the problem, not the solution. What is your perspective?

First, financial markets are a critical actor in our economic system, and, as such, we must get them to understand the impact of environmental change on their long-term health. Otherwise, such financial actors, driven by short-term profit maximization, will continue to advocate for an unsustainable status quo. Second, if you take seriously the scale and nature of transformation required in our energy system, our infrastructure, and our cities, you have to accept that public finance alone is insufficient. In most countries, only 20 to 30% of the economy—at most—is transacted through public finance. The rest resides in private finance. If you want to influence that part of the system, you have to engage with it.

UNEP began working about ten or fifteen years ago with both the insurance and financial sectors, seeking to answer the question of how to integrate environmental change into financial markets. Financial actors themselves are trapped by market signals and regulatory frameworks that create negative and perverse incentives. The challenge ahead is how to create an appropriate regulatory framework to govern national and international capital markets in ways that can scale up the flow of capital to clean energy. Without such resources, we will fall short of the trillions of dollars in investment needed to redirect our energy infrastructure in a more sustainable direction.

Those who view the financial system as irreparable and fundamentally flawed may be correct. But it is the system under which virtually all citizens on the planet operate today. Right now, we see the potential for removing perverse incentives and disincentives for advancing a green economy, though this will be neither easy nor quick. We are also studying how central banks and regulatory authorities operate and whether they are impediments or facilitators to moving capital in the direction of a green economy transition. We need to understand that financial capital markets do not rest on a God-given set of laws that dictate how capital functions, but instead reflect and respond to a multiplicity of regulatory standards and societal choices.

What do you see for the pathway toward making the UN a high-performing global governance body in the coming years?

Since the end of the Cold War era, the question of why and whether we even need the UN has loomed larger in international discourse. On the development front, some see the UN's work becoming more marginal over time as countries develop and new institutions like the BRICS bank emerge. The UN and multilateralism have been suffering from a period of benign neglect. We can see this in how countries provide the UN with insufficient resources for dealing with a host of issues with which no one else is willing or able to deal—from the peacekeeping mandates where there is no peace to keep to the disaster responses to the custodianship of so-called “failed states.”

But at the same time, the UN has been caught in a period of emancipation for many parts of the world that for twenty to thirty years had willingly, or by default, accepted a paradigm of norm-setting and policymaking rooted in the post-war West. Partly because of that emancipation and the resultant sense of skepticism toward international institutions, many nations have increasingly adopted a passive outlook toward norms and standard-setting at the global level.

But there remains an inevitable logic for having a multilateral platform for many of the issues that lie ahead of us. We need global institutions, global norms and standards, and places for global recourse. The UN is not an anachronism; it is not a model of cooperation and shared governance that will disappear. It will continue to evolve, at times painfully slowly, through a period of catharsis, out of which will emerge a period where nations actually reform the UN and its institutions and empower it to play that role, not because of legacy, but in the belief that it is the most promising vehicle for resolving the plethora of economic, social, and political tensions in the world. If these are not addressed through a transparent, equitable, and global policy platform, the world will drift toward an increasingly conflicted, competitive, and insecure future.

The vision you describe would require nation-states to delegate or cede power as never before. Is there readiness to do so?

Many people mistakenly believe that multilateralism and national sovereignty are in a zero-sum relationship. Multilateralism is not an independent universe of action. It relies on the cultures and political wills of individual nation-states joined in a body that is able to transact its affairs in the common interest in a form that is autonomous yet accountable and responsive to the various national interests.

While much of the attention the UN receives is focused on crisis and conflict management, people often overlook how essential and integral the UN system of norms, standards, treaties, and associated Agencies, Funds, and Programmes are to the daily reality of 7.5 billion people being able to communicate, travel, trade, transport, or cooperate on health, environment, children's well-being, employment, gender equity, human rights, intellectual property, and weather services, to name just a few of the support services the UN family provides year-round

throughout the global community of nations. The transformations necessary for the twenty-first century depend upon new forms of global cooperation. Defining a role for the UN platform and services in an interdependent, interconnected world that effectively balances national and transnational interests will, I hope, be part of an informed and intelligent conversation in the coming years about our common future and the institutional and governance models we need.

About the Interviewee



Achim Steiner is the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). From March 2009 to May 2011, he also served as the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Nairobi. Before joining UNEP, he served as the Director General of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) from 2001 to 2006, and the Secretary General of the World Commission on Dams. His professional career has included assignments with governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations around the world, working at both the grassroots and the highest policy levels on at the nexus of sustainability, equity, and development.

About the Publication

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