

# The Sustainability Transition and UNEP

Stockholm Environment Institute

This session will place current environmental trends in the context of the speed and scale of emerging environmental problems.

The background is the Great Transition Initiative (GTI), which built upon the well known work of the Global Scenarios Group. The GTI is a global network for elaborating visions and strategies for a future of enriched lives, human solidarity and a healthy planet. GTI's coherent, plausible, and shared vision complements the many admirable but fragmented efforts to shape our common future. GTI's vision of hope challenges conventional thinking, counters pessimism, and inspires effective action and new values. GTI's network engages some 200 participants, drawn from diverse regions, backgrounds, and disciplines. It offers a unique resource for researching, articulating, and disseminating scenarios that are rich, rigorous, and legitimate. The group has established a dedicated website ([www.gtinitiative.org](http://www.gtinitiative.org)), has held a number of consultative meetings, commissioned a series of papers, and developed a compendium of resources that could be used by groups and organizations. All these are available through the website.

The GTI was launched by Tellus Institute in collaboration with SEI in 2003. This was in response to the urging of several participants, at public events at the WSSD, to develop a next phase of scenarios work leading from thinking to action. Subsequently, similar advice has come from the systems community that convenes annually at the Tällberg Forum.

The key issue is the massive incongruence between the speed and scale of problem confronting humanity and the responses thus far. Many analysts believe with James Hansen that the climate in particular and natural systems in general are close to a "tipping point" (Gladwell 200?), and the cumulation of small and large impacts over several decades may soon result in massive disruptions. True, human ingenuity as in the past has sought to address emerging problems through a variety of tools (technological innovations, market responses, financial investments especially from development funds, civic entrepreneurship, corporate responsibility initiatives, and public policy interventions). However, it is quite clear that the speed and scale of the adverse changes far exceed that of the responses.

Perhaps the only possible source of optimism is in the expectation that the panoply of human responses too might be close to a "tipping point" – which in the GTI discussions was described as the point of "crystallization". This is the point at which diverse actions and processes will rapidly speed and scale up by an order of magnitude into a coherent global sustainability movement. A few optimistic signs are the energy at global events, the recent interest and activity on climate issues, and the move towards policy coherence in rich countries.

To set out the issues and an agenda of action, SEI is hosting a special session on the sustainability transition, focusing both on the agenda for research and the challenge to political leadership.

**Speakers** include Johan Rockström (SEI), Adil Najam (Tufts University), Atiq Rahman (BCAS), Mark Halle (IISD), and Tariq Banuri (SEI). The Swedish Foreign Minister has been invited to chair the event.