

Interview with Mr. Achim Steiner at the Start of his Term of Office as UNEP Executive Director

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- **Q:** Today marks the beginning of your term of office as UNEP Executive Director, what are the things you aim to achieve during this term – in order of priority?

A: The first priority obviously is to get to know my new staff, colleagues, many of the representatives of governments, who are essentially the body that makes the policy that guides UNEP's role. But above all, I would like to reach out to the partners of UNEP in the world. I think as an intergovernmental body, our departure point is governments but our key partners in achieving the goals and mandates of UNEP are really also civil society, the private sector, and the broader society at large. So, one of the departure points for me will be to listen, to understand and from there to build the kinds of alliances that would allow us to do the work that we are meant to do.

- **Q:** Through your career, you have worked at the highest levels of international policy-making as much as at the grass-roots level, in what direction would you like to steer UNEP's involvement with civil society in general, and at the grass-roots level in particular?

A: I think UNEP is a resource for civil society because it provides the international community, the greater public and the international communications process with the facts and the base lines in which we can make a strong case for environmentally sustainable development. But it is more than that. It is not only a source of information. It needs to be a source of inspiration. It needs to be a partner to civil society. The way that happens can take many different avenues. We can be a partner with individual NGOs, for example, or a resource for networks of NGOs. I think UNEP has to find many different avenues in which it can be a partner with civil society. In return, civil society can strengthen the public awareness of what UNEP does and what environmentally sustainable development is all about.

- **Q:** Do you feel UNEP should play a more pro-active role?

A: I think any inter-governmental organization in the 21st century has to be pro-active about reinventing the way it works with diverse actors in society, whether we call them stakeholders or special interest groups.

The fact of the matter is any issue in the 21st century in a globalised world cannot be resolved by only one player or institution alone. Partners are at the heart of being able to tackle these challenges. So, yes, UNEP has to be like any UN or government agency: more pro-active.

- **Q:** How do you see the relationship between markets, global economics and the environment- given that you are a Development Economics specialist by training?

A: One of my main preoccupations and lessons of the last few years is that we have allowed a myth to prevail for far too long. That environment and economics are somehow at logger-heads with each other. Economics is essentially a tool. It is a tool to translate understandings and priorities of societies into rules with which we can trade and act economically with each other. The marginalization of environment and sustainability in the main-stream policy making spheres is something that we must challenge. I view this as a central challenge that UNEP will have to address. The environmental dimension of development is also an economic dimension. And that is what we have to work towards. Therefore, for me, economics and environment are not on two different planets. They actually belong together.

- **Q:** You often talked of “bringing people together”, and of “changing their perception about how they could cooperate to achieve sustainability”, how can this be achieved in terms of North-South cooperation?

A: When you are trying to change things it is always frustrating to watch the pace of change.

People tend to focus more on that which divides us than that which unites us. One of the reasons why I sought to move into the UN is that I believe - at this moment in time - nations are too divided. We have too little of a common agenda; too little of a belief in the international system as serving the interests of all.

The UN is about nations united and acting together. I think the UN and UNEP have a critical role to play at the beginning of the 21st century to ensure that environment becomes, not only an issue, but a basis upon which nations work together. Only collectively can we actually address these issues. As long as the UN and nations are not able to act in a united fashion, we will continue to see the kind of environmental deterioration we have witnessed over the last century.

- **Q:** How urgent is the threat of climate change and how do you define UNEP's role in this regards?

A: It is interesting because it is today at the top of the international agenda for two reasons, I believe: One, is because it is still to some extent not known enough in terms of the scale of the challenge and the implications. Therefore, the urgency derives in principle from the fact that we must know more about what climate change is causing and how we can actually cope with the implications of climate change. The other reason why it has to be at the top of the agenda and why UNEP has a major role to play, is that climate change affects the fundamental systems on which life depends on this planet. If we cannot come to grips with climate change in the next 20 to 50 years the consequences, not only economically but in absolute terms of quality of life, will be so serious that even an agency that has the power of the World Trade Organization in environmental terms will not be able to reverse the changes. I think it is critical, and UNEP has a key role to play in not only drawing attention to the problem, but in identifying solutions and responses for the next few years.

- **Q:** You have always stressed the importance of communications as a tool for sustainable development - how could UNEP communicate its message more effectively?

A: Communications is a great challenge when you are in an intergovernmental organization. You have to be cognizant of and respectful of the diversity of views. It is not easy sometimes to take a very clear stand on issues because it is one of your roles to mediate and to convene. On the other hand, truth must speak and facts must speak. I think one of the roles that UNEP has played in its history, and must play even more so in the future, is to put the facts about what is happening on our planet on the table of policy makers, the media - empowering civil

society to raise (these issues), but also business. I think business is increasingly able to, and is interested to, come to terms with some of the environmental change we are witnessing.

Communications is the departure point for engaging with other actors. The second dimension is that the UN is, to some extent, seen as an international civil service. Communications does not always come naturally to a civil service. But in this day and age, where we communicate across the globe instantly on the internet, through television, I think there is a different way of looking at the positioning of UNEP in the international media and communications context. But ultimately communication goes to the heart of everybody's role in this institution - which is to (portray the) environment, not only as a threat but as an empowering message to people.

- **Q:** To what extent should the science drive the work of UNEP as compared to, for example, policy matters, economic considerations, international relations...etc.?

A: I see them more as a continuum and not as a contradiction or juxtaposition. The reason why we have the UN is that it is supposed to help nations, through the political medium, to work on issues that are essentially based on science and analysis. The departure point for informing, assisting, and providing capacity building support to nations has to be science. It is at the core of particularly an environmentally-focused organization, and science is the base-line with which we work.

But it is not a contradiction to then bring science into the political sphere. It is exactly what the UN exists for, which is to help the political process – informed by science – to deliver the policies for today and tomorrow; to deal not only with conflict but with opportunities for development, in particular with Sustainable development opportunities.

Therefore, science – particularly with the power of science that we have at our fingertips today – we have a future that is so much brighter than when we were only able to observe environmental degradation as a phenomenon. We understand ecosystems much better today. We understand how the atmosphere works in a much more sophisticated way. It gives us options for the future. That I see as UNEP's role.

- **Q:** You are the fifth Executive Director of the United Nations environment Programme and, if I may say so, the youngest. People want to learn more about Achim Steiner. What do you do when you are not working?

A: I think life outside work is very precious. I have a young family; I have a wife and two sons. We are people who treasure very much the time that we spend with each other. The moment that I can seize I spend with my family.

Also coming back to Africa ... I spent many years of my life in Africa. Being here in Nairobi, being here in East Africa, is such a haven for doing many things "outside". I love wildlife, I love going also to the coast for example that I am very much looking forward to visiting in Kenya. And I think it is part of the pleasure and the privilege when you work in an institution like UNEP and you are based here in Nairobi that you have a world around you that you have to discover. That in part is also my passion for being here.

- **Q:** I would like you to deliver three short messages ...

... to UNEP staff:

A: Be proud of what you do because the world looks (up) to you to provide leadership. This institution has a proud record, but it has an even greater challenge to live up to expectations and to the future. Don't be scared by it, rise to it.

... to UNEP partners:

A: Continue to believe in the mandate and in the mission of this institution. It is caught in a difficult moment in time in terms of environment and development and the debate about security. But the world will need UNEP more than ever in the future. Invest in these partnerships and UNEP will invest in return.

... to the wider public:

A: We are moving into an era when the environment will not only be seen as a threat – which is increasingly

(affecting) our lifestyles, our quality of life, and the livelihoods of many of the poorest people around the earth. But what I believe is that the environment is actually a key to unlocking some of the future opportunities for development. We have spent the 20th century discovering how we destroy the environment. We should use the 21st century to learn how we can survive with the environment at the heart of our economic development aspirations.

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