

Interview with Achim Steiner*

Achim Steiner is United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Effective as of 1 March 2009, Mr Steiner was also appointed Director-General of the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON). Before joining UNEP, he served as Director-General of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) from 2001 to 2006. His professional career has included assignments with governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations in various parts of the world. In Washington, where he had previously been Senior Policy Advisor of IUCN's Global Policy Unit, he spearheaded the development of new partnerships between the environmental community, the World Bank, and the United Nations system. In South-East Asia he worked as Chief Technical Advisor on a programme for sustainable management of Mekong River watersheds and community-based natural resources management. In 1998 he was appointed Secretary-General of the World Commission on Dams, based in South Africa, where he directed a worldwide programme of work to bring together the public sector, civil society, and the private sector in a global policy-making process on dams and development.

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From the very early days of UNEP, in 1972, to today, what would you say are the fundamental changes in terms of the way the environment is perceived or managed by the international community?

That is a big question to start with. In many ways environmental change was perceived throughout the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and even into the nineties, as essentially a pollution-oriented issue. Much of the environmental awareness grew on the back of air pollution, pollution of rivers, and impacts on,

* The interview was conducted on 5 October 2010 by Claude Voillat, Economic Adviser to the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Michael Siegrist, Assistant Editor of the *International Review of the Red Cross*.

for example, human health. It also often focused on local solutions. You could close a factory, stop a sewage system, and restore maybe a forest ecosystem.

To address these issues was initially perceived as a luxury, a prerogative of the developed countries. But today, having gone through a phase of intense economic development, we find ourselves in a world confronted first of all with phenomenal environmental changes that are becoming increasingly global in nature – they are beginning to fundamentally affect the life-support systems across our planet. They are also causing ever greater economic costs to society and are driving a rethink of how we view both depletion and degradation of natural resources.

There is also the pollution footprint of the six and a half billion people on the planet today. And here is perhaps another dimension that is not so new, which calls for a much clearer focus: in just forty years' time we will be nine billion people on this planet. Where is the water going to come from to keep us alive? Where is the food going to come from? How will our natural systems function and fare, particularly the ecosystems on which we rely as human beings for lives and livelihoods, in a world that, if it does not change course, will continue to undermine the natural capital of our economies? We are at a point where it is clear that the costs of ecological destruction are increasingly translating into economic costs that society is incurring.

Conversely, in addressing those environmental drivers we can also, from a different perspective, look towards a green economy – an economy in which there is less pollution and more resource efficiency. Indeed we are starting to see how we might create a different pathway for development, be it within a market economy or a state-led economic system. So we are moving from issue-based and location-based issues to a growing understanding of the systemic nature of environmental change, from the atmosphere to the biosphere. On land and in the world's oceans there is essentially a fairly continuous and significant degradation of the earth's vital support systems right now. It is also increasingly driving the environmental agenda in the year 2010.

Does this increasing understanding of the systemic nature of environmental change drive the agenda in a way that makes solutions more likely, or does it complicate matters? Coming back to your explanation, the solution to the pollution issue was initially fairly simple. Now that environmental change is experienced as a systemic phenomenon, solutions are rather complex. Does this shift in the understanding of the problem bring us closer to the solution, or does it just make everything more fuzzy?

I think it brings us closer to the point where we are willing to discuss fundamental changes. They do indeed, as you point out, relate to a more complex set of issues that need to be addressed. We are in one sense trying to develop an agenda for transformation of our economies. At the heart of the environmental impact lies a set of economic principles and paradigms that have treated the environment as either inexhaustible or a luxury commodity or, as often referred to in economics, an externality.

In that sense, yes, we are facing greater complexity because we are talking about transforming our energy systems, our transport and mobility systems and our agricultural systems. But as a result there is also, perhaps surprisingly, a greater probability of change because people have begun to realize that it is an imperative to act, and not simply a choice or an option. So in that sense change has become more likely because we are starting to face up to the magnitude of the problems.

Considering the current economic downturn, do you believe this necessary change is likely to occur any time soon?

Well, the change has already begun. Let's not overlook the fact that significant efforts have already been initiated and that there is also an acceleration in addressing issues of resource management, partly driven by the spectre of scarcity. These are a couple of interesting economic drivers. We increasingly have a population in the north and the south that is highly aware of the price it is paying for environmental destruction. This is no longer a north–south issue alone; people have become much more aware, they have more information at their fingertips and on their desks. They can therefore act in a more informed manner.

We have also seen, in the context of climate change, an explosion in terms of energy and economic policies shifting our economies towards new developments on the renewable energy frontier. Last year, UNEP published the Sustainable Energy Finance Initiative report and for the first time in the history of the modern energy economy, total investments in renewable energy exceeded those in oil, gas, coal and nuclear combined. So we are already seeing, in selective parts of the world and in selective sectors, a response that is indicative of what, over the course of the coming decades, may translate into a universal phenomenon.

But you mentioned the financial crisis. Yes, we face two challenges at the moment: first, societies are heavily indebted as a result of economic mismanagement, which means that the resources for investing in these transformation processes are scarce and extremely tight. Secondly, it is also an excuse for those who essentially argue for the status quo to be maintained. They often have a vested interest in it, to threaten – or frighten – people in some way with an economic downturn, the prospect of no economic growth and the loss of jobs. The environmental agenda must engage in the public debate so that the economic rationale strengthens the ecological, scientific rationale for acting and changing.

There was a piece of good news in what you've told us, namely the high investments being made in renewable energy. Do you think that the externalities you mentioned, the ecological costs, are likely to be taken into account in the near future, resulting in a rise in prices for products that we shall be paying? Would you see this as part of a solution?

It is an essential step. It is not – and I always sound this cautionary note – it is not about the monetization of nature as the all-defining criterion. But it is a fact that whether you are a farmer and a customer who buys from the farmer, or whether you are an exporting nation and an importing nation, we all transact through the currency of monetary value. In the marketplace, as is often the case in public policy

when governments allocate budgets to infrastructure, education, decent environment, and so on, one of the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century was that the value of nature's services to society was, economically speaking, largely invisible. And therefore many decisions led to a misallocation of resources or, in the long term, to unsustainable economic strategies.

At the heart of much of what we do in the United Nations Environment Programme today in that regard is to try to answer the question as to the value of the environment to people and to economies by giving an economic valuation. A project that is really changing the discourse is The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), which is the first attempt to bring together the latest economic and ecological analyses and attribute values to services that nature provides.

Very simply put: a forest ecosystem is not just the sum of the value of the trees measured in terms of timber prices. Its value far exceeds the value of the tree being cut down if you start looking at the watershed services, air purification, and, for example, carbon sequestration. To give you a very specific example, which prompted a transformative debate in Kenya, there is the Mau Forest ecosystem. It is referred to as the water tower of the nation. The value to the country of just this one forest ecosystem is estimated at roughly US\$1.5 billion a year for the Kenyan economy, and it has become the flagship of a national policy to re-establish the forest infrastructure of the nation. In its latest constitution – you may know that the country voted on a new constitution a few months ago – Kenya has enshrined the restoration of its forest cover to 10% of the territory. Today, there is only about 2% of what was once there.

Trying to give a visible value to what nature represents to us in terms of our economies and societies is a critical basis for changing this enduring perception that somehow nature is an add-on that we can choose to be worried about or not.

Your Kenyan example reminds of Ecuador in Latin America, where oil deposits sit in the Amazon Forest, prompting the government to seek ways of preserving the forest by negotiating financial compensation for not extracting the oil. It seems that the government was disappointed by the international community's lack of interest or reaction. Do you think that governments are ready to take this different approach to the value of things?

Absolutely. We have seen a dramatic change in the last five to ten years, particularly as regards political leadership in countries. Significantly, two factors have contributed to this. One is that climate change has increasingly been understood as a problem that may have largely originated in the developed and industrialized world, but the consequences of global warming and climate change are most visible in many developing countries. So, first of all, there has been the perception of environmental change as being primarily a concern for well-off societies.

But when you talk, for instance, to African leaders today you have presidents of African nations putting climate change at the top of their agenda. The question of environmentally sustainable development has become one in which the loss of natural resources is placing growing constraints on the development paths of developing economies. That's the first driver. Secondly, we are seeing many

leaders of developing nations recognize that a transition towards the green economy is also an opportunity to escape some of the very heavy costs that industrialized countries have paid for their development paths.

We had an event – a UN review summit – in New York in September 2010 on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the green economy. There was the Planning Minister of Indonesia, speaking on behalf of the President, who has declared that the transition towards the green economy is now a central objective of Indonesia's development policy. There was the Foreign Minister of Barbados, who presented a number of major shifts in its economic and development policy that have clearly put a small island nation on a green economy development path. And there was also the Minister of Ecuador. These are remarkable examples, illustrating once again the realization that the debate on environmental change and sustainable development is no longer centred in the global north.

To me, Ecuador is a fascinating phenomenon: for the first time, a country has taken the decision not to drill the oil reserves it possesses, in a very sensitive ecological part of the Amazon Forest and in an area that also happens to be inhabited by an indigenous people's community. Ecuador is saying to the world: 'We are prepared to leave that oil in the ground if you, the international community, are willing to share the cost to our economy of doing so'. And the scheme has moved on. Ecuador has now developed its proposal and is going to issue bonds; it will bear half of the cost, in the sense of income forgone by not extracting the oil, and it is inviting the international community to share the other half of the costs by buying bonds and providing guarantees. Its proposal is taking off.

It is striking that we have a Latin American country, an impoverished developing nation with many needs, willing to take a very far-reaching decision, while in the global north the countries with access rights to the Arctic region are expanding the frontier of oil exploration as the ice melts away. So it's a fascinating moment in history.

A very good picture, from the Amazon Forest to the Arctic. Now, we are two-thirds of the way to the MDG target date of 2015. How far have we gone and how far do we still have to go to reach the MDG goals related to environmental sustainability?

Overall, the MDGs have proved to be a very useful framework within which to focus both national action and international co-operation. Those who argue that 'Well, maybe we will not reach all the targets and therefore the MDGs did not offer any added value' are wrong. Sometimes, if you set yourselves a target of running one kilometre and you only reach 900 metres, it means that you have actually managed to run 90% of the distance. In many ways, the recent MDG Review in New York and these ten years into the MDG assessment have shown an uneven but nevertheless, in principle, a positive movement as regards virtually all of the indicators and targets.

But it is uneven in terms of individual countries and of the different targets or goals. As far as MDG 7 is concerned, which deals with environmental

sustainability in the broader sense, you remember that there is a sanitation- and water-supply-related target where we clearly have made some significant progress, even though there is some way to go. In terms of an overall sustainability criterion and goal, we do not capture the full spectrum of what we refer to in terms of sustainability of development when referring to the environment.

So the goal itself has some limitations, but below that level we do see significant progress and again across a very diverse group of countries – progress, for example, in terms of legislation, in changed policies, or in what one might call the proxy indicator of protected areas. Globally we have today succeeded in placing roughly 12% of the terrestrial surface, the land surface of the planet, under some form of protected areas regime. That is not an insignificant achievement. Moreover, in the last twenty years, three-quarters of all new protected areas in the world have in fact been designated in developing nations.

Again, the issues transcending the traditional notion of north and south are coming into play, and we are increasingly seeing policies put in place and perhaps culminating in a more systematic and systemic approach that one translates into what one may now call a transition towards the green economy. More and more countries are taking up that challenge as a political and development challenge.

A lot has obviously been achieved recently. From your perspective, what humanitarian consequences of climate change worry you most today?

We have learned, particularly through the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, that in many ways the consequences and the impact of global warming are a fatal combination. They affect first of all, most directly and immediately, many of the developing nations of this world that have made the least contribution or been least responsible for global warming. The consequences are beginning to affect these countries at a time when they are still dealing with many of the basic needs agendas of development. There is a necessity to invest in adapting to climate change and coping with the consequences at a time when many of these nations want to invest in developing the basic services and infrastructure of their countries.

Secondly, it is also becoming more and more obvious that most of the people least prepared and able to cope with climate change are going to be the victims of it, namely the poorest of this world. Their ability to cope with global warming is very limited. It therefore exposes them to higher risks of very disruptive consequences, be it flooding events, sea-level rise, changes in weather patterns and rainfall, or changes in the ecological systems in which they have developed their pastoral or agricultural economies. As a result of these changes, they will first of all face disruption, then displacement, then loss of economic assets, and finally also the potential danger of being forced into competition with others over an increasingly scarce resource base.

The risk curve that is rapidly emerging and unfolding indicates and signals that the consequences of global warming will affect an ever-growing number of people who are already vulnerable and least able to cope. These people will possibly

become refugees in their own countries or at least impoverished as a result of these changes unless urgent action is taken.

In terms of the response to these challenges, there has been the long-standing debate between disaster response and development work. How do you see climate change in this regard? Do you consider this whole debate is simply swept away by the challenges raised for us by climate change?

We are confronted with a somewhat contradictory set of scenarios. On the one hand, the consequences of global warming clearly indicate that we will be confronted with a greater potential for and greater numbers of humanitarian crises. The flooding events in Pakistan, in China, in West Africa have not yet reached a point where we are able to link global warming and those events in a scientific sense of cause and effect. But clearly, what we do know from the scientific analysis of the potential consequences of global warming is that these kinds of events will increase in the coming years. In fact, the increase in natural catastrophes, as we often call them, already shows a visible pattern. Whether you look at it purely in terms of the number of events or in terms of the reinsurance industry and its statistics, there is no question that we will face more of these natural disasters which inevitably require a humanitarian response. The capacity of the international community and also of nation-states to respond to such emergencies is not only essential. Perhaps, tragically, it will have to grow.

On the other side of the equation, since we know that these adverse consequences are likely to become a reality, we must also look at prevention and adaptation measures. This is where the humanitarian communities, the disaster management communities, and the development communities – as one might call them – do have an urgent and immediate agenda of working more closely together in order to reduce exposure to the climate-change and climate-impact scenarios of the next ten to a hundred years.

You just mentioned that it is difficult to scientifically create direct links between climate change and humanitarian crises. And there has been an ongoing debate about the relationship between climate change and humanitarian crises, as well as between climate change and conflict. How do you see this relationship? Is climate change – or environmental degradation – an accelerator of conflict, or, as some others say, is it also on some occasions an opportunity for peace?

I don't believe that conflict is the inevitable outcome of societies being confronted with challenges such as climate change and environmental degradation. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue that the risk of conflict will not increase as we face a change in population numbers from six and a half billion to nine billion people in just forty years. So there will be more people living in more stressed environments and regions of the world. The key variable here will not be that conflict becomes inevitable, but rather whether societies are prepared to manage the challenges that arise out of these trends. In societies where governance structures and conflict-resolution mechanisms are not in place, where people feel that

they have no choice but to fight for their survival, you may see more conflict emerge.

But on many occasions in the history of humanity we have also seen a heightened awareness of these emerging drivers of conflict leading to a much more focused attempt to try to put in place mechanisms to reduce tension. Transboundary water resources management may be a good example, even though it is always said that, as water becomes scarcer, water wars become inevitable. Again, there are many examples, ranging from the Indus Basin to the Nile Basin, where there have been tensions but they have also been managed. The Middle East is a case in point. In areas where there is great potential for conflict to arise from the sharing of increasingly scarce resources, there are transboundary water management agreements and conflict-resolution mechanisms put in place. It is difficult to assess the inevitability of conflict and climate change, but the risk is growing. In the case of Sudan, for example, changes in the natural environment, including weather patterns and the impact of growing livestock communities and human populations, were studied by UNEP through its Post-Conflict and Disaster Management Branch. It became clear that climate change was an accelerator of potential competition over resources. The question then is whether the state, traditional leadership, the institutions of a nation, are able to mediate and help people to find a more effective way of managing these issues.

In the years to come, we will see much greater attention given to local governance structures. That is the most likely point at which conflict can arise and quickly spread into a more political manifestation of conflict.

If an armed conflict breaks out, what are the most serious effects it has on the environment and what role does the environment play in armed conflict?

UNEP tried to answer that question about a year and a half ago in a review of the role of natural resources and the environment in relation to conflict and peace-building. The first, very interesting, finding was that, in conflict, the relationship between natural resources and the environment is both multidimensional and complex. However, there are three 'principal pathways', as we call them. One is that issues over the control of natural resources and, for example, grievances over inequitable wealth-sharing can contribute to the outbreak of conflict. Countries dependent on the export of a narrow range of primary commodities are also more vulnerable to conflict. This is a direct driver.

Secondly, the environment and natural resources have often emerged as a financing and sustaining factor of conflict – from blood diamonds, the high-value mineral resources that pay for armed forces and guerrilla armies, to the interest of certain parties in gaining strategic control over territory. In such cases, the duration of the conflict is actually directly linked to the availability of these resources to keep it going.

And the third phenomenon is that they can often undermine peace-making. The prospect of a peace agreement can be undermined by individuals or subgroups who could lose access to the revenues from those resources and their very high commercial value of exploitation. They have, in fact, no interest in

reaching a peace agreement, because it would shut down what is essentially an illegal extraction of those resources. These three converging perspectives must be taken into account to understand the relationship between environment, natural resources, and conflict.

In terms of the impact of conflict and war, the environment can again be affected in very diverse ways. There are some parts where conflict creates zones almost devoid of human industrial and development activity. You may find that the natural resource base remains more intact than if it had simply become part of the global and national economic development process. On the other hand, you have scope for illegal and very destructive activities to grow commensurately with conflict and the absence of government, law, control, and monitoring, leading to the decimation of the commercial value of species such as elephants in terms of ivory, rhino, and the illegal hunting of gorillas, for example in the Congo.

These are very direct consequences of conflict situations in which government no longer exercises control and criminal activity becomes a threat to the environment, right down to the sort of mining operations associated with diamonds or coltan.

In general, it is difficult to define a single outcome to these conflicts, whether highly damaging or just moderately damaging to the environment. It depends very much on circumstances. But the bottom line is that conflict ultimately compromises the governance institutions and processes of a society and the environment will suffer, for the natural resources of a country are then not extracted and used in a sustainable manner but in a survival and conflict mode.

And what is the importance and role of international environmental law and international humanitarian law? What is their relationship in general, and do you think that they can maybe complement each other?

Significant efforts were made in the eighties and nineties to try to bring international law, particularly with regard to the environment in times of conflict, into line with the normative standards that the international community would like to apply. Unfortunately, in times of conflict, national and domestic law, and certainly also international law, are the first victims of failing governance and accountability. We are still confronted with two phenomena. First, the international law regime in the context of conflict and environment is as yet very underdeveloped and weak. Secondly, the enforcement of law relating to the protection of the environment during conflict is a very challenging task and may very often be limited to acts exposed once conflicts are over and people and institutions can be held accountable.

One of the most direct consequences has been the destruction of certain environmental and infrastructure assets such as vital parts of water-supply systems, or the bombing of facilities that results in major pollution. Such acts are increasingly on the radar of that international regime, but we have a long way to go. I would welcome more attention by the international law community to this issue, because the consequences of destroying the fundamental environmental assets of a nation not only have an immediate effect upon it but often condemn it, sometimes

for years or even decades, to having to rebuild them or being deprived of access to them. So the costs and the consequences of destroying these natural assets in a country are of far greater impact than the immediate costs in terms of the event itself, or of their initial destruction.

More generally, what place does the concept of climate justice have?

This is a fundamental building block for agreeing what is the normative and also an ethical foundation for some of these necessary policy shifts and directional changes. One of the most fundamental ways you can capture this is through the per capita emissions on this planet. Is it fair that in one part of the world people will be able to emit ten, twenty, thirty times more carbon per person than in another part of the world? How will we ever be able to deal with global warming if we do not find a more just and fair basis for addressing this issue? And therefore the convergence of per capita emissions is one very interesting subject for debate.

But the debate goes deeper too. There is an element of intergenerational justice that, in my opinion, needs to be of growing concern to us. It is within the power, not only of our generation but also that of our parents and certainly the next generation, to fundamentally alter key elements of the earth's life-support systems. Some of them may be damaged irreversibly. Such a capability has a very significant ethical and moral dimension for a generation that has both the knowledge and the means to act to prevent that.

Climate justice, embedded within the broader context of environmental justice, is a concept that will increasingly become a foundation for international negotiations. The reason no agreement could be reached in Copenhagen on addressing climate change in a global partnership and in the context of a legally binding agreement was not the economics, nor the technology, nor the science. In the end, for all parties to come and work collectively on that issue came down to what is a fair deal.

This is also one of our interests with a view to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) or Rio + 20 Summit in 2012, at which we will put forward the concept of environmental justice as a key subject for debate. We believe it is one of the issues that, at the end of the day, societies, political leaders, and civil societies have to address in a more intelligent and, yes, in a more just way than they have succeeded in doing over the last fifty to a hundred years.

How do you see the way forward?

Many of the current international negotiations concerning the environment, environmental change, and environmental degradation – whether on the subject of climate change, the issue of biodiversity and ecosystems, or that of chemicals and hazardous waste – are characterized by a sense of distrust and conflicting, competing, or contradictory interests. First of all, it is my hope that we shall be more and more able to move towards a shared interest in addressing these environmental change phenomena. Secondly, to understand that, in addressing what are now challenges and also costs to society, partnership among nations will open up a whole new horizon in terms of opportunities.

I sit in the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme here in Nairobi. Kenya is a country that, after fifty years of independence, still has only sufficient electricity-generating capacity to supply 20% of its population. Yet it is a country that has renewable energy resources – from wind to solar to geothermal – that could easily produce ten times that amount. Technology partnerships can enable a country like Kenya to literally leapfrog a whole fossil-fuel generation of electricity and power infrastructure. So climate change is also a chance and a major opportunity for technology transfer and technology support in terms of building the capacity of development partnerships on a continent like Africa. Let us not forget that today, even with around one billion people, satellite images taken at night still show a continent where hardly a light shines through.

This is just one example of how we need to understand that the concept of moving towards a green economy and the need to take action on these environmental phenomena are linked to a whole series of development opportunities and pathways that many countries will not be able to address on their own. Hence my belief that, despite the considerable scepticism voiced by some people about multilateral agreements and international platforms for action, a world community that must learn to live together on this planet in ever-growing numbers has a vital interest in changing its perception of the environmental agenda in the twenty-first century. This is not a cost to development. It is, to my mind, perhaps the most promising paradigm shift that will allow us to adopt a positive and even hopeful outlook in talking about development.

It makes me cautiously optimistic when one might have every reason to be a pessimist, given the sobering facts confronting every one of us today.