

Interview - Achim Steiner

Written by E-International Relations

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Achim Steiner is the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director and Under-Secretary General of the United Nations. From March 2009 to May 2011, he was also Director-General of the United Nations Office at Nairobi. Before joining UNEP, Mr. Steiner served as Director General of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) from 2001 to 2006, and prior to that as Secretary General of the World Commission on Dams. His professional career has included assignments with governmental, non-governmental and international organizations in different parts of the world including India, Pakistan, Germany, Zimbabwe, USA, Vietnam, South Africa, Switzerland and Kenya. Mr. Steiner also serves on a number of advisory councils and boards including as the International Vice Chair of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED). His work has been recognised by a number of awards such as the Tallberg Foundation's Award for Principled Pragmatism and the Steiger Award for "commitment and important work in the protection of the planet". Mr. Steiner played an important leadership role at in the recent COP21 Paris Climate Conference.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

When it comes to the field of the environment and sustainability, there are probably two or three areas I would point to. Certainly climate change research, not only in the sense of pollution in the atmosphere but also impacts in the biosphere on the ground in the sense of natural signs, whether it be ecology or the future of agricultural production. This is obviously a frontier of research that is epitomised through the reports of the IPCC. The IPCC is essentially a compilation of global research and I think their research is literally changing our world today in the way we look at the future and the kinds of decisions that need to be made.

I think the second area is technology. We have seen for the better part of 30 years alternative energy technologies lingering in the drawers of businesses and university research centres not really making it to the market. Then in the last ten years an explosion in terms of renewable energy technologies, which in turn has given rise to many more publicly funded and private sector funded research and development programs. I think this is certainly a technology frontier that is going to be central to what is happening in terms of the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

A third frontier is an understanding of what's happening to our planet in the phenomena that are playing out in economic and social terms. We had a summit last year in Japan on the issue of risk management and disaster risk reduction, because the implications of both natural catastrophes and also of climate change are registering not only in terms of human suffering in social impacts but also in economic terms. This is just one illustration of how we go from the natural sciences in terms of how environmental change impacts on our societies, and then to the responses in terms of technology and poverty. One more area that I think will emerge as increasingly important in the coming years is the future of agriculture and food security, especially in a world that will have 10 billion people to feed in the year 2050. The current agricultural production system may be able to produce the food required, but at the same time it will diminish the ecological capacity of the planet to feed us, and that is a major concern that I think is receiving as yet little attention but which will very quickly become a significant area of research.

How has the way that you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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If you take the 20th and 21st century perspective of what has changed, I think much of the 20th century was dominated by a paradigm where human ingenuity, science and technology would essentially enable us to almost liberate us from the dependence on nature and the planet's natural resources and ecological systems. That was very much the sort of view that science and technology throughout the 21st century were about: overcoming disease, overcoming food insecurity etc. Yet as the century came to an end, the world found itself in a very strange situation where actually maintaining the ecological foundations for life on the planet moved rapidly centre-stage again: climate change, loss of biodiversity, the collapse of fisheries in the oceans, and all of this has changed the outlook which we have in the 21st Century. I would argue that after Paris we've got an extraordinary example of how a change in our environment is fundamentally redefining the economic and development outlook for the next 30-100 years. That is already manifesting itself in the decarbonisation pathways, in a different view of how technologies and infrastructure will work, and also looking at how we can invest and maintain the ecological foundations of our economies.

Perhaps one concept that has certainly influenced me significantly, or clarified in a narrative sense what I believed I was witnessing, is this notion of living in the age of the Anthropocene. Paul Crutzen took this term as saying that we are in the midst of moving out of the Holocene and into the Anthropocene era, so that even geologically you can measure domination by human beings. This gives rise to an understanding of how profound and far-reaching the impact of 7 billion people on the planet is today, but it also looks to the human ingenuity of science, technology and knowledge as actually being a very positive, because we have the means and the power to rethink the future and not simply to extrapolate the development pathway of the last one hundred or thousand years. I think the concept of living in the age of the Anthropocene will become a popular culture term, and not just philosophically and scientifically speaking a powerful way of capturing the time in which we live.

The agreement made at the Paris Climate Conference is on the whole generally regarded as a big success. In the run up to the Conference, were you optimistic or pessimistic that an agreement could be reached?

I was relatively optimistic for two reasons. One because I saw a significant shift in the appreciation of the threat of climate change being registered both on the political radar of many governments and also in the strategic planning departments of corporations and boardrooms. Therefore I think the momentum that was manifesting itself in the lead up to Paris was largely one that pointed to a more robust willingness to move forward, notwithstanding the complex politics of negotiating a fair and reasonable agreement amongst 193 nations.

I think those who criticise Kyoto and the lack of progress are in one sense absolutely right. We are in a race against time and we have lost a great deal of valuable time. However, looking at things in a broader historical context, then in the space of a 20-25 year window science has opened our eyes to an extraordinary threatening phenomenon, and governments and the United Nations through the rather stumbling steps of the Kyoto Protocol have helped the world to develop the most complex and challenging collective response that I can think of in the history of humanity. If you look at it this way, then Paris is just another milestone towards this extraordinary change that is now imperative, but is challenging vested interests through new technologies, new markets, the cost of transition, and the risks that need to be managed. I would consider Paris successful simply from the point of view that it has taken us forward by enabling a future that can still stay within 2C subject to further ambitions being codified in the convention. But perhaps most interestingly what you saw in Paris is that economic actors beyond governments are increasingly focused on what climate change means to them both as a threat but increasingly as an opportunity, and I think that is where the big transition will come from and the acceleration.

How would you describe the general atmosphere throughout the two weeks at the Le Bourget site?

By the time they arrived in Paris, nervousness gave way to a determination to reach a credible outcome. It was focused, it was intense, it was at times bordering on crisis, but never losing that sense of having to arrive at an outcome that would be justifiable by politicians to their home audiences and would send a clear enough signal to the global economy that the future is going to be low-carbon. I think that was something that was shared by all, and I think everybody knew that there were many red lines and stumbling blocks, but none of them sufficiently serious to justify a failure in Paris. I would describe Paris as intense, focused, sometimes bordering on that sense of crisis, but

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never losing the determination to arrive at an outcome.

The cynics or realists, however you want to call them, would argue that this accord doesn't amount to much as it is neither a treaty nor entirely legally binding. What would your response be to them?

I would say critical perspectives, doubts and skepticism are justified. I don't think they are illegitimate, but I think they are no reason to diminish the platform that Paris has now created for each one of us, whether it's as citizens, corporate actors or governments. So I think we need to avoid any form of complacency, but I would also say that the world was either not ready or not capable of reaching one legally binding agreement. Perhaps we have learnt the lesson over the past years that trying to align the future of a 190+ nations, when some of them don't even have access to electricity, and others consume 25x more energy per capita than others, is extremely difficult. What I think we need to recognise is that yes, you can be critical and skeptical, but don't be an armchair critic. We need to move forward. The alternative was what? Letting each country decide on its own, or creating a club of rich nations or developing nations that would act on their own? That wouldn't have solved the climate problem. I think we shouldn't allow cynicism to be a legitimate way of qualifying Paris, because that's the luxury of those who have no responsibility taking responsibility. But at the same time, I would say Paris was what was achievable and in terms of what was achievable, Paris actually delivered a lot and it is enough for us to now move forward with a very clear focus and a very clear sense of the need for acceleration and greater aspiration. The test for this will come very quickly in the following COPs and in the 5 year review cycle.

How much of an influence over time do you foresee technological advancements having in reducing carbon emissions and mitigating the effects of climate change?

I think the role and importance of technology is fundamental in dealing with the challenge of climate change, but I think people then turn that into a kind of paradigm where technology will fall somewhere from the heavens and all problems will become solvable. I would say what is fundamental is that we change the signals in our economies, our economic and public policies, because many consider markets and our economy to be almost analogous to the laws of science and physics which they're not. Economies and markets are essentially shaped by human beings. They are a function of our social and economic priorities, and technology in a sense will be an outcome of the kind of economic priorities and signals we set for the consumer, for the investor, or the company that is thinking about its next R&D program. We need to change our energy systems, our mobility. We need to reinvent agriculture, infrastructure – all of this is dependent on new technology and new science being developed and being brought to the market. But for that to happen, you first have to do what we've been trying to do for the last 20 years, which is correct our economies which have simply priced all the negative impacts of current and status quo technologies out of the economic equation. I think the minute you correct that, you see what happens for example with renewable energy technologies. Twenty years ago, it was unimaginable they would become a central part of our energy system. Last year, close to \$300 billion was invested in renewable energy infrastructure worldwide, which amounts to more than 50% of all electricity generating infrastructure investment. I think we will see the same thing with mobility. In the last two or three years, we're seeing an interesting shift back into new concepts of mobility and technology, from the Teslas to Amazon and Google and others. I think it's indicative how quickly markets will respond.

The Breakthrough Energy Coalition, consisting of philanthropists including Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, have pledged billions of dollars to early stage clean energy companies. What role does private philanthropy currently play in combating climate change, and how much will that role change over time?

Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg's philanthropy, in the sense of their commitment of their wealth to social and common public goods, is beyond question. They have demonstrated this by the way that they have made resources available. In that sense, philanthropy can play a significant role. Bill Gates initially chose the health field, then increasingly the agricultural field, and Zuckerberg is looking at the world of communication and connectivity. I think they can give an important impulse as we have seen with foundations across the world over the years. In some ways though I would have wished Bill Gates or others would have come earlier to the party, because over the last 10-15 years the struggle was that it was only through public policy that we were able to bring these fundamental challenges

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to the attention of the public. I think for those who say, “let the markets deal with it, or let philanthropists just deal with it”, I can assure you if that had been the case, we would probably still be at the Kyoto I stage in climate change. Having said that, philanthropists can provide very important impulses, but let us all be clear, I think Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and many others are not only buying into the climate change from a philanthropic point of view. They are investors, they are looking at clean energy solutions as investments and this market is now a hundreds of billions of dollars market.

To give another example, UNEP has been working over the last few years with pension funds to put together the portfolio of decarbonisation quotas, which bring big institutional investors together to commit to decarbonise their investment portfolio. We started off with less than \$10 billion two years ago and thought we might hit the \$100 billion mark by Paris. In the middle of Paris, we were able to announce \$600 billion of commitments – some of the largest insurance and pension fund institutions joining this. So it is an illustration of how we can look at the financial and capital markets now as being the greatest multipliers in terms of accelerating the speed of action. That is why we have been studying in unit with an enquiry into the design of sustainable financial systems, because they have been the most reluctant, the most conservative, and wedded to the status quo kind of economy and economic infrastructure that has held us back from moving forward more quickly. I think having our credited economic policy we need to focus on philanthropy, but also on the investment world as being central to enabling governments, cities and companies, to shift capital to new technologies, markets and opportunities.

In many ways, it could be said that individuals feel rather powerless on environmental issues with so much responsibility rested on nation states and corporations. What can be done at the individual level to tackle climate change?

History has shown us time and again that people change the world. You are right that the political economy around climate change has been dominated by an economic paradigm that was wedded to essentially a fossil fuel based economy and future. Yet as we have seen time again, in political change terms, whether it is a battle against an apartheid system or combating climate change, it is people who change things. What happened in Paris is not only a change in the outlook of those who have political and economic power. It was also a response that has become increasingly inevitable because of action on the ground as well.

You are in your tenth year now as Executive Director of UNEP and the end of your final term is in June of this year. Looking back over those years, what would you say have been your major challenges and major successes within the organisation?

The major challenge is a long held dogma that actions for the environment would always be at the expense of the economy, of jobs and human wellbeing. I think in the last 10 years, not attributing this to only me, but having been part of this process, we have not only rewritten the environmental and sustainability agenda, I think we have also managed to challenge this dogma in fundamental ways. The work on the green economy, on the economics of ecosystems and biodiversity, the work we have done in the enquiry on financial and capital markets, and also on sustainable consumption and production, have significantly changed the scope for an environmental agency within the UN to be at the table when decisions are taken that traditionally would never have included an environmental perspective. UNEP is an entity today that is invited to G7 summits, to G20 summits, to BRIC summits, and we are working at the centre of technology markets and technology policy. I think the Sustainable Development Goals adopted in the new 2030 agenda were not an accident. They are a further affirmation of the shift in that thinking and therefore I think the role that UNEP and the broader environmental community from the sciences to grassroots will play in the years to come will be far more central than in the past.

To conclude, what would you say is the most important advice for students who are passionate about the environment, particularly those involved in environmental activism?

Firstly, don't let anybody talk you out of the passion that you hold because the older we grow, the more reasons we are given why things that we intuitively believe in and know to be right are somehow not realisable or are not realistic. I think that is this greatest threat of growing up and of education. Hold onto your passion, but at the same time realise

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that when you have a passion for the environment and you understand how important it is to become engaged, combine that with a skill that allows you to move into the mainstream of our societies and our economies. It can be technology, it can be politics, economics, and combine that profound understanding of the environment with a skill that allows you to then as you progress in your life, to change the conversation, the focus, the politics, the R&D budget and become part of that economy of the future. It takes me back to notion of the Anthropocene. We will only change the phenomenon of degradation and destruction that human impact has brought to this planet if we accept a new kind of responsibility. But it cannot only be responsibility in the sense of standing on a pulpit and preaching or criticising. It is to help reinvent the future economy and make our societies more sustainable; that is the advice I would give to students. We are often either supposed to be grassroots or we sell out and go into the system. I think that is a false dichotomy. I think it is to bring the grassroots into the system and to bring the power of the system to the grassroots agenda. That is what I think universities need to teach. Finally, don't start with the notion that you're going to change the world overnight. Start the change where you're at, be it in the canteen where you eat, the student council or governance of your university or institution, in your family or startup business. That's where you hone your skills that you can then scale up right then to running a country if you want to in the future or big business.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.