Originally published by "*Europe's World**, Spring Issue 2012", http://www.europesworld.org

As head of the UN's environmental arm UNEP, ***Achim Steiner*** *believes that multi-lateral governance structures are overdue for a radical overhaul*

Twenty years after the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, the world is once again taking the Road to Rio, but in a world that geopolitically, socially and environmentally is markedly different from that of the late 20th century.

From women and trade unions to environmental NGOs and indigenous peoples, there is a deep-seated sense that we are living in an increasingly unequal world, and that the environmental services on which we all depend – especially the poor – are also rapidly hitting their limits as a result of decades of pollution, damage and degradation. Enlightened sections of the private sector can also see the writing on the wall, for we live on a planet where climate change and the loss of productive ecosystems can, and increasingly will, disrupt global supply chains.

Extraordinary achievements have nevertheless occurred in some areas – economically, many

millions have been lifted out of poverty in places like China and India, and environmentally the world's network of protected areas has grown substantially. But for all that, the development path of these years has by-passed far too many areas; it has brought prosperity to the few rather than the majority, and is running up an ecological bill that is paid by the poor and the vulnerable every day and will ultimately have to be paid by generations to come.

The *status quo* is simply a road to nowhere rather than a Road to Rio. Two overarching themes have been chosen for Rio+20 in June; the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and an institutional framework for sustainable development.

For some, the green economy represents the logical evolution of sustainable development, a path to making economies more responsive to the needs and aspirations of all peoples – a way of making globalisation a servant rather than the master. For others it smacks of some kind of green gloss, conspiring to maintain the existing economic order but in a way that provides a feel-good factor.

When UNEP launched the green economy initiative in 2008, the organisation was actually building on existing work pioneered by NGOs and civil society. And from the outset it has been UNEP's intention to provide both a re-think and the supporting analysis of how to shape the global economy in a way that provides not just growth but also transformative social and environmental outcomes.

Our major report, compiled in partnership with a wide range of UN agencies and entitled "Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication" was launched late last year. It underlines that an investment of 2.2% of GDP, invested with the right kinds of policies and innovative mechanisms, can grow the global economy and generate employment, but in a way that keeps humanity's footprint within planetary boundaries.

With respect to energy, it concludes that investing about 1¼% of global GDP yearly in energy efficiency and renewable energies could cut primary energy demand by 9% by 2020, and close to 40% by 2050. Employment levels in the energy sector would be one-fifth higher than under a "business as usual" scenario as renewable energies would rise to close on 30% of the share of the world's primary energy demand by mid-century. And savings on capital and fuel costs in power generation would under a green economy scenario average $760bn a year between 2010 and 2050.

The green economy debate has matured considerably of late. Rio+20's second theme, which echoes the issue of international environment governance, is only maturing now. Even since UNEP was established in 1972 as a result of the Stockholm conference on the human environment, there have been many calls for it to be further strengthened. One of the results of Rio+20 is that these calls are re-surfacing with a new vigour. That's because what has emerged in terms of structures and institutions is simply too fragmented in its present form. Over 500 multi-lateral environment agreements (MEAs), many with their own governing bodies, have become an administrative burden, stretching the financial and human resources of many developing countries.

The key question is not just whether a global organisation for the environment is needed – many concede that the *status quo* is not an option – but how it would be configured if it is to be transformative. In the first place, it would need enough authority so that ministers responsible for the environment have some sort of parity with their economic and social policy colleagues. UNEP has a Governing Council that meets annually, but decisions by environment ministers are referred to New York, where they can either be agreed or quite literally dismissed as part of the UN General Assembly process.

At the same time, there is a need for an anchor institution to provide authoritative policy guidance to the MEAs so as to address the fragmentation problem. A more authoritative and strengthened body could also get to grips with the issue of financing. Decisions on how funds for the environment should be allocated internationally are often taken in parallel fora like the global environment facility. And meanwhile the lack of a central and anchoring policy framework is leading to increased costs and the inefficient targeting of financial resources.

Another glaring gap that stems from the existing governance arrangements is implementation. Much time is spent on agreeing targets and timetables, but far less on making them happen on the ground where it matters. Any new structure must address this disconnect, perhaps by having a dedicated implementation arm. Other important elements include building accountability into existing and future environmental agreements, backed up by peer review mechanisms.

Finally, science: sound science underpins sound policymaking, but all too often scientific knowledge is unfiltered or unfit for co-operative decision-making. A comprehensive science policy interface spanning environmental challenges and sectors and capable of building scientific capacity in developing countries is another key to a more forward-looking governance structure.

Rio+20 may turn out to be yet another meeting in the long calendar of international events, or like the Rio conference of 1992 it could be something very special that made a difference. Now it is up to the present generation of political leaders to show that they are equal to the task. And it is for civil society leaders, too, to guide and inspire the political process.

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