

## Global Environmental Governance: Way Ahead Not Closed

Documentary from  
*Global Environmental Governance Forum: Reflecting on the Past, Moving into the Future*  
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convened by the [Global Environmental Governance Project](#)  
of Yale University and the College of William and Mary

### Video Transcript

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NARRATOR: In June 2009, four generations of environmental leaders gathered in Glion, Switzerland to rediscover the past, analyze the present, and imagine the future of global environmental governance. This film is an edited version of the UNEP Executive Directors panel at the *Global Environmental Governance Forum: Reflecting on the Past, Moving into the Future*. The Forum was convened by the Global Environmental Governance Project of Yale University and the College of William & Mary.

JAMES GUSTAVE “GUS” SPETH, UNDP ADMINISTRATOR, 1993-1999: Welcome all of you here to this historic segment of the Global Environmental Governance Forum. It’s the first time in history we have all five of the existing and former Executive Directors of the UN Environment Programme here with us to discuss the reason, the second reason that this is an historical moment, and that is that I think many of us who’ve been in this business for a long time sense that this a precious moment for change. So, we have here four decades of expertise in the area of global environmental governance – an unprecedented resource. So let me introduce them in order of appearance at the UN Environment Programme. Going back to 1973, Maurice Strong, succeeded by Dr. Mostafa Tolba, succeeded by Elizabeth Dowdeswell, succeeded by Klaus Töpfer and the current Executive Director, Achim Steiner. We have UNEP and these individuals to thank for winning many, many battles and I shudder to think at the way our planetary environment would look today had we not created UNEP. But despite winning all of these battles, but despite winning all of these battles, we’re still losing the planet, we’re still losing the war. So what do we do? Where do we go from here? Now, I was urged and asked by the sponsors of the Global Environmental Governance Forum to begin appropriately with the incumbent in the office, who can state his views and also say a few words about the UNEP as it exists today. So, without further ado, Achim Steiner.

ACHIM STEINER, UNEP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 2006-PRESENT: Thank you, guys. You said, ‘What has to change and how do we move forward?’ Three things I think are vitally important: we know what is happening to our planet therefore there is no excuse not to act in a different direction. Secondly, we also have the means to act and therefore there is no excuse why we should not be acting. Third, the question is now one of political leadership, but not only in looking at political leaders, but at looking at

the public. The cost of environmental change that is unfolding on our planet today is threatening not only our communities, it is threatening the very fabric of our economies and therefore of our livelihoods. Whether you're a farmer or an industrialist, the reality is that if many of the changes that we now envisage arising out of the degradation of our planet, the destruction of the national capital that underpins essentially everything we do on this planet, then the cost, which is very often the unit of accounting that we use in our societies to determine whether something needs doing or not, is so high that we need to change. We have all the ingredients of moving towards a more sustainable future, a greener economy, and I think the meeting of the economic and environmental agendas are where the scaling up and accelerating of actions will happen. That is the challenge of the moment.

SPETH: And now our second speaker is Ms. Dowdeswell.

ELIZABETH DOWDESWELL, UNEP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 1993-1998: I'd like to be in that group of people who have a vision for the future, but my experience has also led me to have some real questions about the pragmatism of what we can actually bring about. Before we start talking about structural change and architectural reform, we have to get straight what it is we want to achieve. It seems to me that there are some fundamental questions on which I submit that we do not yet have common purpose, a common objective, and we certainly don't have priority setting and we don't have either quantitative or qualitative goals that can be measured. The very first one is: what is it that member states want? Do they want an organisation that is a sustainable development organisation or do they want an organisation that is an environmental organisation with the responsibility for making environmental input into the broader sustainable development question? Secondly, are we an organisation, that has as our primary focus the global environment, or are we primarily concerned about what is happening at the local level? And thirdly, although it's very common to say that we want UNEP to be the environmental conscience of the system, I wonder if nation states are really prepared to have us be that conscience when it may challenge their very sovereignty. There is a good deal of confusion and perhaps more importantly a great deal of hypocrisy in what member states say publicly and privately about what they want, and within the system themselves it's not just the governments, it's the institutions within the UN system itself. I think there's an inertia that comes from vested interests who want the status quo to remain. So I do not see a powerful, new comprehensive world environment organisation with real power as so many have said they want in the near future. If I'm wrong, if there's real evidence of an appetite for change and a real commitment to something other than superficial change then certainly count me in as part of that group. A minimum level of aspiration and ambition I think would be UNEP as a specialised agency. UNEP must demonstrate unassailable competence in scientific assessment, information and monitoring. The second thing that I think UNEP must not retreat from is being the only part of the system where the priority before it is actually the environment, and I think to stray into a broader range of conversations is only going to bring it into duplication with other agencies and it's going to destroy the main competence that it really has. Success in these two areas, which are really back to the basics, I think is what is going to then allow UNEP to do what it does best, so I think there's all kinds of hope and I look forward to further discussion about those options.

SPETH: Thank you, Ms. Dowdeswell. Klaus Töpfer.

KLAUS TÖPFER, UNEP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 1998-2006: I believe that it easy to understand, we cannot be in the situation where we are subsidising our welfare on the cost of coming generations, and this links the economic crisis with environment crisis. It is a huge chance now not to discuss only what is the best environment organisation but to combine this and make it a

central part of fighting the short-term economic crisis. If you can succeed in this, I have no doubt that the right further development of the organisation will follow immediately. We have to combine those two crises and to underline that environment is not something like an esoteric topic of those that have no problems in the world, but is in the centre of economic stability.

SPETH: Thank you, Klaus Töpfer, very much. Maurice Strong.

MAURICE STRONG, UNEP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 1972-1975: This situation, this meeting, comes at a time when we have got to elevate our sights, both in terms of our understanding of what we face and in our belief in what we must do. I see this as the ultimate challenge that has actually ever confronted the human community. We talk about saving the Earth. The Earth's not going away. The Earth is only shown the conditions that support a human form of life for a very small portion of its history, within very narrow parameters, and we're now infringing on those parameters; literally, we are in charge of our own future. That's what we're really talking about when we talk about environmental governance. This whole question about accountability is extremely important, because actually governments have met, and someone's already mentioned this over the years. We've met at Stockholm, and following Stockholm we had a whole series of conventions and agreements, and then further conferences to which governments agreed on principles. If you took all of those, and if governments actually did what they have agreed to do, we might not find this meeting necessary; at least the agenda would be a little more promising. So there is a need for accountability—accountability of what governments do to their own people and to the global community. That's becoming more and more important. We also have to recognise that the current economic crisis and the environmental crisis—these actually have their roots in the same thing. They are not separate and competing issues. You have to manage our future by managing the economy and the environment as integral parts of the same management process. So we have a tremendous risk, which I believe, as I said, is literally the survival of our civilisation, but now that everyone understands that we have to reconstruct our economy, we have an opportunity to reconstruct it in a way that will actually produce a new generation of opportunity. We have to do it consciously, we cannot just allow it to proceed on the basis, 'Well it'll work out, it'll work out'. I look at my own grandchildren, I say: 'What kind of a world are they going to have? Are they going to have a world where they'll enjoy some of the benefits that we do? Is it going to be a world in which they cannot even go outside because it's too hot, and they will be denied some of the pleasures and opportunities which we've enjoyed?' That kind of a world is what we'll get if we fail to do what we must do. The details of structure and that are important, obviously, but the issue has to be addressed with an understanding that life itself is at risk.

SPETH: Mostafa Tolba.

DR. MOSTAFA TOLBA, UNEP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, 1975-1992: We did not inherit the Earth from our parents, we borrowed it from our children and we are doing absolutely nothing to return back what we borrowed either intact or with interest. We are destroying everything. Where do we go? Well, I suggest that this distinguished group bring back to the distinguished

governments of the world the principles they themselves declared since 1972. What I'm calling for is incremental approach. I have tried this and I think it works. When we were doing the Montreal Protocol, I accepted going down from 100% stoppage of the production of chlorofluorocarbons at that time by 2000, which was ten years or eleven years later. I accepted fifty percent. I accepted fifty percent because I wanted to get everybody on board, and what happened after that is that that was 1988 or '89. In 1990, the same governments who were saying no agreed to 100% by April 2000. Two years later, in 1992 they agreed to pull the 100% to 1997 instead of 2000. So, I am a strong believer in going stepwise. If we don't get it all, we don't lose it all. Start with a limited sort of movement into the right direction and have a clear target ahead of you, and that is what is actually missing from the government officials. They don't have a specific target that they want to reach in the next twenty years or so. If they do I think we all find our ways too. Thank you.

SPETH: Thank you, Mostafa. Well we've had five really outstanding presentations, and thanks to each and every one of you. Some of you, really, it seems to me, are raising a pretty basic issue about how do we redefine the economic activity on our planet so that it truly is supportive of people, communities, jobs, nature. Do you see real possibility of deep change? Achim, have you had luck with your 'global green deal' and what about this deeper change issue?

STEINER: Well I think in the last few months, citizens virtually in every corner of this planet have been wondering what on earth is happening to us. When we talk about trying to reform our social sectors, achieve food security, poverty alleviation, health insurance, we struggle over sometimes a few million dollars and yet overnight we were able to mobilise \$3,000 to 4,000 billion depending on how much we'll in the end flow out to rescue and bail out corporations, banks, financial sector enterprises. At the same time, we have not found it within our means as an international community of 190 nations to put more than \$1 or 2 billion a year on the table to combat climate change. I believe the Minister of Environment of the future is going to be a ministry, and a minister who will have more impact on government than today's Minister of Finance, because the simple truth is, if you take some of the facts and examples we just received here, we live in a world where 9bn people hit a limit of what is sustainably usable. If you start destroying the very productive assets you have, the natural capital you have, whether it's the soils, the water we need, clean air, if you have these, in a sense, degraded, you're drawing down your capital. Environment is not the luxury of having a nice patch of forest behind your house or a little lake to go to over the weekend. It is the life support systems of us as humans and therefore also of our economy. The United Nations is meant to bring together the capacity of nations beyond national interest to look truth in the eye, to face the facts, and not to try and twist that because they do not suit a particular agenda of today. So that's the first thing. I think there is an imperative that will change the way we look at environment—not simply as something that follows development and then we clean up afterwards. The future is a very different one Gus, and I think if you look at what is happening right now across the world, there is a green economy happening everywhere, but it's not allowed to happen. It's not allowed to scale up; it is challenging the political economy of today's structure. The United Nations Environment Program is today the environment program of the United Nations – it's

meant to work through the whole system. The truth of it is, it is still a little bit like an appendix to a system, because it reflects the reality of today's economy and political economy.

SPETH: A theme, just to make a note of it: something I heard coming through very strongly from the panel is the theme of government accountability. Question from the audience, please.

MOHAMED EL-ASHRY, GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY CHAIRMAN, 1991-2003: All crises that have taken place in the last two years—the economic crisis, energy crisis, food crisis, the ongoing water crisis, the ongoing degradation of ecosystems—all have the same root, which is: an outmoded development model. It calls upon the Secretary General of the United Nations to convene a high-level task force or commission to identify a new vision for development on the basis of a green economy, a low-carbon economy, but also importantly to address whether the current global policy capabilities and institutions can actually cope and deal with all of these crises at the same time in the future.

SPETH: Klaus Töpfer, what do you think of this?

KLAUS TÖPFER: We believe that at this moment, this house is under fire. We must act immediately. Therefore we have to link it with the economic crisis. In addition, we have to ask what are the best pre-conditions to avoid those shortcomings in the economic and social and environment system as we saw it now. But can we do more? What is necessary to integrate the financial structure? My recommendation is: please don't single out only environment governments – they are first to do it but is not enough. Use the crisis, which is a crisis of institutions as well, to reconsider what is the best solution for the future integrating these topics. Don't ask only for coordination.

SPETH: And the next hand is right here. Could someone please bring a mike to Birgitta Dahl?

BIRGITTA DAHL, SWEDISH ENVIRONMENT MINISTER, 1982-1991: I think it is very important that national parliaments and even local government comes into the implementation process much more actively than they are today. It's not enough with governments to be able to implement; they need decisions, programs, budgets from their parliament. They need parliamentarians also as opinion builders to bring along the seam of society. So I think that should also be brought into the discussion.

TOLBA: The problem is that in our part of the world—in the Third World—we produce the most outstanding laws but they are never implemented. How do you help with the public participating in the formulation of the law, and then being ready to participate in this implementation? It's a puzzle that we can't find the solution to.

SPETH: Now, we will hear from one of our young people here.

JASON MORRIS-JUNG, PhD CANDIDATE AT UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY: I would actually like to question a bit this idea of "our common future", or this iconic symbol of "one world". While it's true that we're all in this together, it is also certainly true that the impacts of environmental destruction are certainly not equally felt or equally borne. How is political

reform possible, or how can it be done in a world where the concentration of wealth is increasing? Thank you.

SPETH: That sounds like a very good question for Maurice Strong.

STRONG: Well, in simple terms, tax the rich and the offenders, and ensure that those who are the victims are paid enough to rise above their victimisation.

SPETH: Liz?

DOWDESWELL: One of the things that UNEP can do is take the intelligence and the energy and the innovation that comes from cities, for example, that comes from business and industry, that comes from civil society, and have them become a force of ideas to add to what governments bring to the table.

STEINER: I think a lot of it has to do with empowering people with the truth. The truth is the most powerful political force of change. Now science in itself doesn't change politics, but science in the minds of people who have to make choices is immensely powerful. I think UNEP is a success story from day one to today in having empowered the public with signs that basically could not be challenged on the basis of vested interest, and that is something we will continue to do because I think everyone recognises that it is fundamentally important to a democratic but also transparent and open debate in our societies.

SPETH: Now I heard a question about indicators in this same context. The truth of indicators, please.

FRANZ PERREZ, HEAD, GLOBAL AFFAIRS, FEDERAL OFFICE OF THE ENVIRONMENT,

SWITZERLAND: Would it not be a task for UNEP to try to develop a short list of seven to eight clear goals and compliment them with indicators of implementations to allow for accountability in politics? Thank you.

STEINER: One of the perhaps sobering truths is that we have created a body of legislation that intent very often was really progressive, but in implementation is starkly behind promise. Just the ten major environmental conventions over the last couple of decades have taken 4,100 decisions. Now decisions are binding, maybe not hard law, but that is perhaps also one of the issues. Environmental law, international environmental law, is largely soft law. You can sign anything you want: countries must have a mechanism today to hold each other accountable for the commitments they make. Otherwise, you can continue to sign one thing after another without consequence. But, you also then have to empower an entity to provide that foundation. And this is where we come back to that discussion of UNEP.

SPETH: We certainly need that hard information; we also need basically a new consciousness. We need to hear a lot more in the future from the preachers and the prophets and the poets and the psychologists if we're going to mobilise the will that we need to do these things.

JANOS PASZTOR, DIRECTOR, UN SECRETARY GENERAL'S CLIMATE CHANGE SUPPORT TEAM:

I'd like to ask a question for Achim, but also for the first executive director of UNEP. How can one tweak the system or radically change the governance response so that this global accountability could appear?

SPETH: Let's hear from Maurice and Mostafa on that question.

TOLBA: As far as I'm concerned, there is a straightforward answer and I'm putting it in the form of a question: how many international environmental treaties have a non-compliance article in them? The only complete treaty that has is the Montreal Protocol and it has no teeth, no teeth whatsoever. You will never reach anywhere with the climate or anything else if you don't have a real non-compliance with teeth in each of these treaties.

SPETH: Maurice?

STRONG: Well there actually has to be a real penalty for non-compliance. There is not now as we've heard. One way of attacking that is a legal system which will permit people who believe they've been hurt by the non-compliance to sue. Basically, implementation depends on motivation. We have to be able to do things that beyond anything we've yet done and what makes me pessimistic is not our capacity to do it, but our will to do it at a time when we need unprecedented levels of cooperation and yet we've got tremendous divisions and conflicts within the world. We really have to remake our civilization.

SPETH: Yes, in the back?

DANIEL ESTY, DIRECTOR, YALE UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND POLICY:

Reflecting on your time as head of the UN Environment Programme, I wonder if each of you could, in just a sentence or two, tell us what obstacle you think stands in the way most of successful environmental strategy at the global level?

SPETH: There's a good one. Who wants to start? Maurice? You're waving a wand... what's going to disappear?

STRONG: Unfortunately, my wand doesn't work and I left it at home. No, basically we really have to accept that this is the greatest security risk we've ever faced. We have to face it with a degree of cooperation we've never had before, and that has to include incentives and penalties: penalties for those who offend, and those have to be enforceable.

TOLBA: We are not going to lose the Earth. We are going definitely to stop the deterioration and return it back. I am an eternal optimist and whatever is going to happen with climate change will be an incentive that people move and they will then move.

DOWDESWELL: There's more myth than substance to people's understanding of how interdependent we are. People agree with the rhetoric of interdependence, but the decisions taken are very much in personal interest and ultimately that leads me to say that the thing we don't pay enough attention to—we've got science, we've got technology, we've got technical details of diplomacy— but ultimately we don't pay enough attention to ethics, and that's really what makes us part of the global community. Only when our own national citizens see themselves as part of the world are we going to be able to have the kind of implementation that we want.

TÖPFER: It goes without saying that we always try to avoid those final decisions, which are very difficult to take. If you don't have the backing from the broader public, it's extremely difficult. At the end of the day you need governments to decide, to make limitations. If we make limitations, we will stimulate technologies, we will stimulate changing behavior.

SPETH: Achim, last word.

STEINER: It's very difficult to follow this sort of analysis but let me do it in a very personal way. Why did I join the United Nations? If you Google 'World Environment Day in 2009', you will be stunned by how many millions people, not organised by UNEP and the UN, but inspired by the United Nations having created the World Environment Day, went out of their houses and did something on that day to say to say, 'I care'. And I really do care, so why are you making it so difficult for me to turn my interest in doing something differently into real action? As long as we punish a person that has to choose between a light bulb that is energy efficient but costs three times more and the one that is not energy efficient, why do you expect people—often poor people—to make the so-called right choice? Governance derives from the will of the people. Our dilemma in the international governance system today is that the system is not keeping up with where people want the world to act. You start getting governance reform when people go out on the streets and demand an international governance system that is aligned with a necessity of moving us towards a green economy, an equitable economy. That is the reality of 2009, and it is the people who will change that—not the bureaucrats, and not the politicians.

SPETH: Well, I thank the panel very much. What a wonderful panel!

NARRATOR: The Global Environmental Governance Forum is an initiative of the Global Environmental Governance Project. For more information on the event, visit [environmentalgovernance.org/forum](http://environmentalgovernance.org/forum).

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Global Environmental Governance Project Team

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