



## Pioneers of the Planet

### Episode 9: Achim Steiner

Richard Black - I'm Richard Black...today I'll be meeting someone whose life has taken him from the open ranges of South America to the impoverished frontier lands of South Asia and now occupies the top environment desk in the UN organisation. How did he get there and why? And what drives him on? Our Pioneer of the Planet today is Achim Steiner; former head of IUCN, former head of the World Commission on dams, he took over as Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2006, at a hugely busy time in the organisation's history. According to his predecessor, Klaus Töpfer, he brings 'youth, dynamism, intellect and a deeply held commitment to environment and sustainable development issues. According to some of his staff, he brings a driving energy that sometimes has them gasping for breath. But then, he does have a planet to save. Achim, welcome to the programme; now tell us first about the early years and what prompted your involvement in environmental issues?

Achim Steiner – In many ways I grew up very much in the midst of nature because my parents were farmers and I was born in Brazil on a farm. I grew up almost on a horse so to speak, and in that sense nature and the environment were not issues that you thought about. They were just around you and you took them for granted. But really the realisation that environment was an issue that I became more and more interested in happened both at university where we were looking at some of the big questions; where our economy and society is going, but ultimately when I reached Pakistan and I started working and I saw that if you were ever going to deal with the issue of poverty then you had to go back to the natural resource base.

Richard Black – And you were doing what in Pakistan?

Achim Steiner – I was working at the time, as a project assistant in a project in the North West frontier province that was dealing with rural development, community development and what became patently obvious was that you could only address the issue of long term development if you began to find ways in which the community

could reinvest in itself, in its ecological infrastructure, and that's what we call it today, at that time it was its forests, its watersheds.

Richard Black – What was important in that particular community? What needed to be done to safeguard long term livelihoods that wasn't being done?

Achim Steiner – Well interestingly enough it was to revive or further evolve a system of social management because as you might know and many of your listeners, in Islamic societies there is a very strong tradition of protection, of conservation often for religious and sometimes spiritual reasons, traditional reasons. And the control mechanisms also, grazing grounds and access and so on, were increasingly being lost because of the pressure or population growth and the breakdown of social traditions. And so, village communities and the gatherings were really trying to figure out, in that case, a way in which to create a contemporary social management structure for these what you would call 'common resources' but were in fact belonging to a group of people and needed to be managed more actively including deforestation and therefore protection.

Richard Black – So it's really social trends that are threatening environmental stability which I suppose are a type of micro-chasm of the society that we see around us today?

Achim Steiner – Precisely, that is why my journey on environment and sustainable development really had its take off point in a village somewhere in North West frontier province in Pakistan.

Richard Black – And where did you go when you crossed that frontier?

Achim Steiner – Well after that I returned to the headquarters of the German technical corporation agency GTZ; I spent some years there but I had already in fact met my new employer IUCN in Pakistan where we started working on these issues. And from there I then moved on to Southern Africa and spent five years working there.

Richard Black – Now that's an interesting institution isn't it? International Union for the Conservation of Nature and yet they too have strong themes looking at poverty and rural development and so on?

Achim Steiner – Well the interesting thing is that I am a developmental economist by profession and I chose to leave the development institutional world for a conservation organisation at the time, because I felt that they had thought through further their development model. If you recall the world conservational strategy ‘Caring for the Earth’ were two key documents that IUCN, WWF and UNEP in fact at the time had developed and when you looked at what was being proposed there, that was I think a far more forward looking approach to development than perhaps traditional development corporations were practicing.

Richard Black – More than people like the World Bank and so on were practicing?

Achim Steiner – Absolutely and I think we still have the challenge that institutions by virtue of their mandate, their mission and their tools also have a lens through which they look at development and I often say, if you take the development issue today, you have environmental professionals in the bank, you have economists in UNEP. But we look at development through different lenses even though it’s the same development process and that does change the perspective.

Richard Black – Do you think things have changed since those early days at the IUCN because now you have bodies like the World Bank certainly talking the talk about ecosystems services and preserving the services that nature gives us?

Achim Steiner – I think there will always be a natural evolution in terms of how institutions progress and the bank is as much a banking institution as it is also a knowledge hub and a synthesis point for development knowledge. We still have very lively debates and also perhaps different emphasis when it comes to for instance, the priority of the green economy. In this financial economic crisis, UNEP has argued very strongly for a Global Green New Deal. The World Bank is also trying to play a very active role in stabilising the madness of the current global economic situation but with different emphasis. But I think therein lies perhaps an important debate that has to be conducted in each of our countries.

Richard Black – This is something that you’ve spoken about for a couple of years now, a ‘Green New Deal’ what in your view does this consist of?

Achim Steiner – Well, the Green New Deal was a response literally to the financial economic crisis and to the realisation that societies in many countries were about to

spend 3-4 thousand billion dollars on stabilising an economic and financial crisis. That is a unique historic moment in which you either invest in yesterday's economy and simply stabilise it or you take a significant share of that money and you invest it in tomorrow's economy.

Richard Black – But a lot of the language from politicians and bankers has been exactly that hasn't it? It's about stabilising things so we can get back to business as usual.

Achim Steiner – Well and this is why the debate about the global economy and the Green New Deal had such resonance around the world. We now have dozens of countries that have Green New Deals in their stimulus packages which are promising; let us see how far they go and I think it is worth mentioning that some countries truly are taking this all the way through; a country like (South) Korea. But at the same time what we are looking for right now is a rational debate; if we are willing to spend the \$100 billion on stabilising one company, how could we ever, if you look back from a history book written in 2030, explain how in Copenhagen we could not find the \$100 billion year for a partnership in financing a global response to climate change?

Richard Black – Lets say that you were the dictator of a small country and you were able to put in place your ideal Green New Deal, what would it consist of?

Achim Steiner – Right now what you have to look at is where are the greatest potentials for efficiency gains in your economy? Because the Green New Deal and the term 'green' is not necessarily in an alternative universe or an ideology, it's a principle of a different way of doing business. We identify in the Green New Deal, five areas which would both provide economic stimulus, create jobs and also enable us to address major environmental change phenomena. They are; energy efficiency; a no brainer, we know that energy efficiency investments create millions of jobs; it is already beginning to happen. Renewable energy; why is it that solar power stations are being built in Europe rather than in Africa? Why are Geo-Thermal power sources not being used in the Rift valley when they've been known to exist for well over a hundred years, and only one Geo-Thermal power station was built in Kenya in the last fifty years? So renewable energy has enormous potential. Third area is sustainable transport, we are a mobile global society, we are wasting an enormous

amount of energy on resources and let's rationalise it. Fourth is ecological infrastructure, the forests of this world, the watersheds of this world; these are essential parts of our economy, not just in terms of the rural economy but power stations need water to be cooled, they'll be switched off, they need it for many other reasons, in terms of our agriculture and economic sectors. And finally sustainable agriculture, we have a, in a sense, an unfolding crisis in feeding the world in the next fifty to one hundred years, we have to rethink the model of agriculture. And again this is where many countries in the developing world, 60 to 70% of the population still live and have to earn their livelihood.

Richard Black – Now your Green New Deal would obviously address climate change, it might address water availability, agriculture, soil quality and so on. But it's often said that the roots of this multi-faceted situation are population and consumption; if we're really going to have a Green New Deal don't we have to address those two issues?

Achim Steiner - Well I would argue with you that energy efficiency for instance, sustainable transport is about consumption...

Richard Black – You may be consuming the same amount, you may be living the same lifestyle but you're living it in a green way.

Achim Steiner – This is the beauty of environment as a driver of economic change and innovation. We can actually maintain our lifestyles, we just have to invest in technology innovations and efficiencies in order to be able to do it at one fifth or one tenth of the energy or the products that are needed to produce the kinds of services that we're used to. And this is not theory, if you look back fifteen or twenty years ago, cars perhaps consumed on average fifteen to twenty litres per hundred kilometres. Today on average in Switzerland, the whole car fleet runs at less than seven litres, and so this is not theory, it is just the luxury of either ignorance or complacency that has allowed us to go on for so long and not take advantage of these opportunities.

Richard Black – And on the population issue, I mean it was being discussed back there in the 1970's in Stockholm, it's almost absent from the debate, hasn't the quality of the debate therefore gone backwards?

Achim Steiner – Well we must not forget that in the mean time, family planning and the support to population control measures, but as an individual choice and not as an autocratic instruction, I think has actually grown enormously. This is why we see the population growth curve essentially levelling off over the next thirty to forty years

Richard Black – At about nine billion!

Achim Steiner – At about nine billion, but if you take population densities and you take the consumption footprint of an American and a Bangladeshi, there is room for a lot more people if we actually reduce our consumption footprint. And I'm not arguing that we want to be 20 billion on the planet, but I've always been reluctant to tell either an individual, a family or a nation that they should somehow not have children anymore. I think that has, to me, less of a chance to achieve the intended outcomes that we're looking for than investing in essentially a more rational and efficient and intelligent economy and society for the future. Therein lies the opportunity.

Richard Black – In the few minutes we've got left, let's talk about your current job as head of UNEP. You are, I suppose, the most powerful environment person in the United Nations organisation. What do you see as the priorities for your organisation over the next couple of years?

Achim Steiner – I think first of all let me first qualify powerful; perhaps the most vocal I would argue and certainly my colleagues at the other UN agencies...

Richard Black –*Laughs*. Perhaps the most troublesome!

Achim Steiner – Well the nice thing is my colleagues, including the Secretary General, actually have embraced the issue of environmental and sustainability responsibly inside the United Nations in a way that I don't think has happened before. The Secretary General has committed all of us, for instance, to go towards climate neutrality in our organisations, to lead by example. Our partnerships that we have today have just arrived here in New York and have met with my colleagues in the peacekeeping area where we are looking at how can we help with UNEP to have the peacekeeping operations having less of an environmental impact? And also to look at the potentials of bring environment in the context of peace building. These are the kinds of areas, right through to our partnerships with the UNEDO, the UN

WTO, tourism, WHO, on issues such as DDT and malaria. Our role as UNEP is to bring the best of the science and the knowledge and the expertise from around the world and work with our sectoral partners and institutions in the UN to essentially bring environmental sustainability to the mainstream of their and therefore our collective work.

Richard Black – In international politics of course, a lot of these issues had their seminal moment in Rio in 1992. Now there's talk of having a follow up summit which would be twenty years on, do we need it? If so, what should it aim to do?

Achim Steiner – Well if it becomes a summit in search of a purpose, I think it will be met with a certain amount of scepticism because the world has seen many summits. I personally believe that twenty years after Rio, we do have to revisit core elements of the sustainable development agenda and particularly the environmental architecture and the international financing architecture for environment and sustainability issues. I think to some extent, we have passed the point of value added. We have to re-think and I think with the multilateral context, it is high time that member states posed again the fundamental question, 'what will we need from the multi-lateral system?' On environmental issues over the next twenty years in order to be able to work together, cooperate together, work and ultimately live together on this planet under stress.

Richard Black – And if you were able to set the agenda; I mean Rio obviously had several outcomes; Agenda 21, climate, bio-diversity, forests, desertification. What would you look for to come out of, say a Rio 2012?

Achim Steiner – I think an increasing affirmation of a paradigm shift. Now that may sound somewhat abstract but I think what Rio marked was not the beginning of something, it was in fact the culmination of something. Rio was the moment when ten to twenty years of increasing knowledge, awareness, activism and also facing choices had come together and produced a series of products. I think in leading up to 2012, we would also have to acknowledge that we are increasingly facing the challenge of economy and the environment, something that is not detracting from each other but rather conditions of each other. And if you take the issue of climate change, there is no solution to a phenomenon like climate change for countries on their own. Neither the Maldives nor the United States can address climate change in

isolation and that is an extraordinary phenomenon that nature has, in a sense, thrown in front of us. And I think for multi-lateralism, this is the challenge of our time; coming up with answers of how we can find partnerships that are based on equity, fairness, solidarity, but also accountability, because that may be another question in 2012; we sign a lot of things, how do we begin to hold each other accountable for them?

Richard Black – And finally, as you sit at your desk at UNEP head quarters or you come in to studios like this or you speak at platforms like the CSD; do you think back to those formative experiences, riding horses in Brazil, trying to alleviate poverty in Pakistan and do you still draw lessons and ideas from those?

Achim Steiner – That's an interesting question, I do not necessarily do it consciously but if you ask me in that way then yes, very often. I think we all have formative experiences, and moments when things come together; either intellectually or in terms of our experience or simply in terms of people who have influenced you. And I have many milestones in my journey that have prepared me perhaps for the work that I do now. And that have also given me the resilience because there are many moments in this work when you feel like just packing your briefcase and going back to the horses perhaps. But I have been influenced and I have been shaped by many people who have shown that persistence pays off and that the right vision is also something that people respond to. And in that sense I often draw strength from that but I'm also excited by being in an organisation right now, that to me holds one of the keys about the future of our societies.

Richard Black – Achim Steiner, many thanks.

Achim Steiner – Pleasure, thank you very much.