
“I see my role as a professional with a mission: to enable people to acknowledge multiple perspectives ... and to work from there to move forward.”

**Interview with Achim Steiner
UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director, UNEP
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C. Otto Scharmer: *What are two or three formative experiences that shaped you as a person and prepared you for the kind of work that you are doing now?*

Achim Steiner: When I read your question, I thought of the fact that **I grew up in different cultures as being perhaps the most formative experience.** I think that led to my interest in working in an international context, which is where very early on the journey forward became clear and while also enabling me to look at issues from different vantage points. I think it's a great advantage when, as a child, you have parents who move around and you are exposed to different cultures.

A second one is probably the experience after I completed my studies and went to work in Pakistan in a rural development program. I began to realize, having gone in as an economist and as a regional planner working on poverty alleviation that **there was no way we would ever be able to help the rural economy, and therefore the poorest in developing economies, to escape poverty unless we actually addressed the natural resource base and the degradation of these as a key issue.** It is there that I began to, in a sense, change my path from a classic development economist to focusing more on sustainable development and natural resources and the environment.

And perhaps a third experience would be the **World Commission on Dams, for which I worked almost four years as Secretary-General.** Our ultimate goal was to bring together

¹ This interview is part of the Transformation of Capitalism research project at the MIT Green Hub. All interviews will be posted shortly at <http://www.tc.presencing.com>

people who saw in a dam both the greatest signs of human ingenuity and also the greatest signs of what one might call tunnel vision, if not folly.

The World Commission on Dams was an experiment to bring together not wise old men, but rather real leaders from different constituencies and work out a framework. It was, to this day the most intense, harrowing but also mind-expanding experience for me. It was all **about how you bring together people who believe they have nothing in common and through an iterative, empirical process begin to create a shared reality--one from which you can then work back towards the differences, but with a fresh and a common objective.**

So, I would say these three certainly have been very interesting moments.

COS: You being so in the midst of the World Commission on Dams, what are your key learnings from that?

Achim Steiner: The genesis of the [World Commission on Dams](#) was already an experiment. Basically it was, on the one hand, the result of the World Bank at the time having undertaken an evaluation of dams and a sense that the conclusions were to some extent diluted. This was a red flag to all those who doubted the efficacy of dams and they felt the bank should exit the process.

On the other hand the Bank was in a quandry because if it did not put this report out it would have created a major public controversy.

At the time I was in Washington working for IUCN [the International Union for Conservation of Nature] trying to begin to build bridges between the environmental community and the bank.

The bank asked, “Can we organize a meeting that would just bring people around the table? We would like to explain what we're trying to do with this study.” And out of this came a workshop.

I suppose this was when **I began to really understand that if you have a contested territory, the first principle has to be trust and confidence building. Otherwise you cannot even have a conversation with each other.**

This workshop took us months to organize. We had to agree who would be there, who would not be there, how to speak to this issue. And out of this came **the truth-and-reconciliation commission concept if you will, on dams.**

That's how the idea was born. **It then took us a year and a half to actually construct this. Everything seemed to be about parity, about not trusting the other side,** and the key role of the convener--the secretariat--was to strive to maintain the accountability and transparency that would allow the commission even to be formed.

You had Medha Patkar, an Indian activist who had already twice threatened to drown herself in the river in protest over the building of the Narmada Dam; and Göran Lindahl, who was the CEO of ABB who was supplying turbines to global dams. You also had Professor Kader Asmal, at the time the water affairs minister in South Africa but also a human rights lawyer; and other great individuals such as Professor Thayer Scudder.

When we had these commissioners around the table for the first time it seemed that the task before us was almost overwhelming, and yet all of them had come because they were convinced that confrontation was not yielding results.

This was the only common departure point. But over two years we in a sense built-outwards with **the key first being to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's views.** This is important and cannot be over-stated—the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the perspective of the other person at the table.

So, Göran Lindahl had to acknowledge that Medha Patkar was not just a mad activist but had real reasons for putting her life on the line. Medha Patkar had to recognize that Göran Lindahl was not some corporate monster who didn't care, even though he'd flown in his private jet to that meeting. I mention this just to show you the worlds that were colliding and yet meeting there.

After this came the process and here I must applaud Kader Asmal's brilliant chairing.

He created a two-year process where increasingly people departed from just saying “The status quo does not take us anywhere” to, “We have been given an enormously important task, which is to build a bridge for people to work with each other in order to overcome their differences, to open their eyes to the dam building but also to the reality of the resettled people, and so on.”

The commissioners now had ten meetings which forged a kind of common purpose, based on personal trust. In the end somebody like Jan Veltrop, who was a 70-year-old dam engineer, relearned in many ways his whole professional career through this commission.

The other part of it was to establish an **empirical base through joint studies**, very much based on scientific empirical research that would allow the commission to have its own validated knowledge base from which to develop its recommendations. So, these are a few elements that emerged as critical, some of them by design and some of them by simply **crashing into walls** along the way.

Finally, to have any integrity the chair and the secretariat could not be seen to be captive to one constituency or another. **That made my life hell because every suspicion was immediately projected and channeled through the secretary general and the secretariat.** So, it was a 24-hour psychological job.

And that may be the final lesson: **Egos play an enormous part.** Behind every threat of walking out lies a hurt ego or a sensitive or a paranoid element and these individuals have to be

individually enabled to stay part of the process. I could go on for hours, as you can see, but it was a remarkable experience.

COS: It seems to me very relevant to our conversation, because many global issues we face right now actually need this kind of truth-and-reconciliation approach and putting to work some of these principles that you described. Even if you invite the right people, if you do not really integrate all the learning that you mentioned, then very rarely does something useful come out of these meetings.

Achim Steiner: Well, there are a few books and PhD dissertations and so on that have been written about it. If you want to delve into it you can do it with a bit of Google search. I think the point you just alluded to has accompanied me through the rest of my professional life. **I see my mission as a professional as an enabler-- to enable people to acknowledge multiple perspectives and then try to establish a shared sense of reality and work from there to move forward.**

Because unless this happens, human-beings are quite capable of acts of seeming insanity—take the state of our economic policies as we so often practice them today.

We are for example being told that as a result of greenhouse gas emissions we are tinkering with the most fundamental life support system functions on our planet and yet we're still arguing about whether we should pay 5 cents more per gallon of petrol. I mean, it's just a kind of human schizophrenia. **But I think all of these issues ultimately have to go through some sort of cognitive but also political and shared process to enable people to rise to the next level of knowledge that empowers them to act.**

COS: *How do the symptoms of the current economic, environmental, and in many ways spiritual and moral crisis play out in the world you are living in?*

Achim Steiner: If I look back over my 25 years or so in the fields of development and environmental policy, there is no question that the knowledge and the awareness of many people have grown as the warning signs have grown exponentially.

So, in a sense, we've built up a capital of knowledge and awareness but that often gets lost in the frustration that things don't change overnight.

That is not say that change is not occurring. Recently in Kigali, Rwanda I heard an African president lay out the boldest speech I have yet seen from a leader on this Continent on how environment has been neglected but has now become a central part of the economic future of his nation, Rwanda. If you're interested, [take a look at it](http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=585&ArticleID=6176&l=en).² It really is remarkable.

² <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=585&ArticleID=6176&l=en>

So there are positive sides. However, the other side is **that the political horizon of our world is still so badly geared towards answering long-term challenges that people will negate fundamental realities that they know to be true** when it comes to environmental issues. Take the **chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel**, as an example. She's a physicist absolutely convinced about climate change. You do not have to spend a minute explaining it to her from a scientific and economic or even an ethical standpoint. But being a Chancellor, the tradeoff she has had to make—for example over the last year with the financial crisis-- is sometimes stunning, and this is true for every leader.

These are, I think, very disconcerting phenomena where short-term political expediency overrides the medium and long term realities.

The third dimension of the crisis right now for me is the particular issue of climate change. We have finally reached a tipping point in the discourse between environment and the economy because the environment is no longer a luxury in terms of the chronology of development or an issue of a minority or an issue of one location or feature, be it a wetland, a meadow or a forest.

Environmental change has now become a fundamental determinant of future economic development choices, economic well-being, and therefore has entered the mainstream of public choice and corporate risk management.

Indeed we have, in the last five to ten years, reached a point that has fundamentally changed the scope for the science of environmental change to begin determining the rationale for economic policy choices and even political choices.

COS: What do you consider the key root causes of the crisis symptoms that you described?

Achim Steiner: For thousands of years, whenever you depleted a resource there was always the next place to get it from. Until the late 1990s, warnings that the resources were finite were all seen as “doomsday” predictions. We will always find a new resource, we thought.

The second part of it was that somehow **human ingenuity would be capable of allowing us to transcend the laws of nature and physics and that for every problem we created we would find an engineering or a chemical or an economic solution-- a technological fix.**

We thought it was just a matter of accelerating this process of technological advancement and we could buy ourselves out of our dependence on nature. And that's where climate change, though not explicitly, has fundamentally changed our perception.

Why? Because at the end of the 20th century and at a point in time where humanity is richer and more technologically advanced than ever before **we have been suddenly thrown back to the**

most fundamental of truths: we are not able to exist outside the laws of ecology, physics and the atmospheric science of this planet.

Whatever technological fix we pursue will, if global warming is allowed to proceed and escalate, not provide an escape from the disastrous scenarios we all face. I think that realization is in many ways very significant.

The symptoms that underlie the crisis we face today are rooted in an imbalance between ecological or environmental reality and fundamentals and economic realism, as it has evolved in our societies over decades and centuries.

If you told somebody in 1970 or in 1980 that we would be trading carbon emission rights by 2010, they would have laughed you out of the room. The last time most people had heard of CO₂ was perhaps when they were in school. So at the crucial UN climate convention meeting **in Copenhagen we are, to my mind, negotiating not just an environmental agreement but the most significant treaty for the global economy since the World Trade Organization.**

And that I think is where the origin of the problem lies, but also the source of our solution. **Ecology and environmental issues are finally converging with the laws and principles of the markets and public policy around the economy. That convergence I think is the fascinating aspect of this moment in time.**

COS: What is the blind spot in economic thought that prevented us from integrating these two things that you described in the past?

Achim Steiner: Well, being an economist by training, although perhaps a reformed one, I would have some sympathy for those economists who would argue that there was no flaw in economic methodology, because the ‘science’ of economics and the methodological frameworks were perfectly able to capture what were then called externalities and the whole theory about opportunity costs and so on.

I think the flaw, or the reasons perhaps, behind the lethargy in moving from the economic policy frameworks of the 20th century into a new economic thinking are rooted in two things. **One is that in the past we had insufficient empirically validated knowledge to describe in an actionable way to capture the environmental change phenomena unfolding.**

Let me explain this. If you recall it was Rachel Carson who began to create a consciousness about the impact of chemical pollution and biodiversity, but it was initially based on ad hoc case studies. Only now has the body of knowledge and the emergence of ecology and the biology into a scientific body of knowledge allowed us to understand the complexity, but also the vulnerability of our environment.

The other point is that economic theory once looked at nature as an extractive resource that allowed us to get away with the illusion that there was really a very low price or an externality not worth mentioning.

The second point is related to what one can call the political economy. **Essentially we have been held back – and this is not a new phenomenon – by vested interests.** Vested interests are investments in particular technology paths or in particular economic structures--in particular they are markets and structures that exist and define relationships between suppliers and consumers.

For a long time, the world's leading economy has in a sense been held hostage to an economic self-interest that led it to avoid the confrontation with the scientific fundamentals of climate change. So to my mind it has been the political economy that has been responsible for economic failure rather than the science or the economics themselves.

COS: So, if you look at the current situation, what do you expect to see? *Could you outline two or three scenarios for the next three to five years?*

Achim Steiner: That's an interesting question. They're not necessarily alternative scenarios or contradictory ones, but they are potentially parallel scenarios. I think **one is a scenario where tipping points essentially throw societies into turmoil or into a heightened state of awareness.**

The counter-one to that is essentially more a conflict scenario, where in the absence of a credible, equitable framework for global action on something like climate change, you may actually have an outcome **where countries become confrontational with each other.**

Examples might be threats by some leaders to put hefty import taxes on the goods of countries that fail to take climate change seriously; conflicts over water resources because the melting of glaciers is cutting off supplies to downstream countries and users; or the collapse of vital eco-systems – for example, an Amazon eco-system that is today the single largest water pump on the planet.

These extreme developments could either destabilize societies or catapult societies forward to act to counter them.

It is **basically a scenario of greater instability and less predictability-- something that is good for economics, or for economies for that matter, and therefore by extension also not good for societies.**

However there is another scenario and that is a transformation over the next decade in a more planned rather than a reactive mode.

One that turns the climate change challenge, and the environmental change challenge overall, into an opportunity to transit to a Green Economy.

The significance of a Green Economy is that you do not need you to be an ecologist or to believe in nature. It is, in some respects, just about doing things more efficiently, more

effectively, in a less polluting manner.

Even if you are a career skeptic, it does not take much brainpower to recognize that on a planet of six billion people, rising to over nine billion by the 2050s, we will face massive resource constraints under a business as usual path—never mind some of these tipping points mentioned earlier.

I believe that people are thus going to increasingly buy into the economic importance of the environment and environmental or ecosystem goods and services which in turn will unleash a recalibration of economic policy instruments—and here the role of government will be critical.

Regulatory frameworks are essential to enable the marketplace, be it technology companies, be it entrepreneurs, be it venture capital to move in one direction or another.

And we will see political leaders develop wings when the public sentiment is aligned sufficiently for that to happen. In some ways it has and is already happening.

Indeed for me that was the fascinating lesson of watching the response to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 4th assessment report of 2007—its powerful conclusions almost liberated politicians to suddenly start thinking about actions and scenarios that even the year before had been unthinkable.

Meanwhile the financial crisis has just shown us that, when there is a crisis \$3,000 to \$5,000 billion can be mobilized seemingly overnight—so why cannot \$100 billion a year be mobilized to take the world away from a climate changed-doomed path?

Under a Green Economy scenario, that kind of irrationality may well disappear as you unleash a whole new trajectory for how nine billion people can live on this planet where other transformative ideas, such as biomimicry, move into the economic mainstream.

I don't know if you know biomimicry? It's the school of thought that looks to nature to identify processes and materials that open the door to far more efficient and less wasteful manufacturing and products alongside new kinds of advanced materials, pharmaceuticals, agricultural practises and energy generation systems.

The point of departure here is that nature has, over millions of years, solved many of the challenges that confront humanity if only we can understand and 'mimic' these in our economies.

So this new and exciting field is where engineering, chemistry, and physics meet with ecology and biology with inordinate possibilities for a far more sustainable development path.

Look at modern agriculture-- it has in many ways reached a dead end not least in terms of food security, and certainly needs a fundamental re-think. It is breathtaking that we allow the top 30 centimeters or 40 centimeters of our planet's surface to be fundamentally disturbed every year by turning it upside down or letting it be washed away.

We cannot continue this horizontal expansion of aridity by expanding the area in which we grow. We also cannot continue to go down the intensification path of the last century.

On fascinating possibility is **breeding new versions of soy, corn, wheat and barley that are perennials rather than annuals – why is not more research being done here?**

Perhaps because it's not in the interests of the current market and the economic model, despite this being a rational way forward? This is where governments need to change the incentives

So, we have all these examples and thus there are actually no absolute reasons to say that we cannot live on this planet with nine billion people, increasingly ensuring the well-being of all of them and still being able to sustain the productive capacity of our planet.

COS: You frequently talk with presidents and heads of states, as in your recent meeting in Rwanda. *If you were to advise Barack Obama about three key strategic actions that he could take that would most help accelerate the transformation to a more sustainable economy and society, what would you suggest?*

Achim Steiner: "President Obama is already taking many actions that will accelerate such a transformation. Three specific actions that he is already undertaking: --Include the environment as an integrated part of economic recovery, --make a significant investment in renewable energy, and -- enact climate change legislation. I think the the overarching action, which Barack Obama is a master at, is to frame imperatives to act in terms that relate to people's daily reality and making the connections to how key changes or improvements can make a crucial difference..

In other words taking the whole discourse on environment from an accusatory and finger-pointing one to one of hope, opportunity, and enabling. This is critical. And it is rooted in the notion that the 21st century is essentially about environmental agendas, about cleaning up after other people's mistakes and oversights and having to do so against all the biases and vested interests that were there. We are well beyond that point.

Today, we are at a point where – and this would be my second issue – **a critical bridge is to merge the environmental and economic agendas.** The more we are able to link the discourse in these two worlds and domains and constituencies and religions, you could almost say, the more we are going to unlock the almost prisoner mentality of the the 20th century-- that to succeed in one could only be done at the expense of the other.

I believe that dead-end discourse and that paradigm is crumbling, and from that emerges a whole new paradigm. That would be my third point: that you then focus on an agenda of quick wins and transformative approaches.

Take the renewable energy sector, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, or ecological infrastructure. I think all of these lend themselves to a content-specific discussion and a public debate that can raise awareness about the opportunities..

There also needs to be an accelerated awareness of the notion of ‘ecological infrastructure’.

We have been conditioned over the last 200 years to think of infrastructure as only the built-up environment. It has been a single economic driver and a symbol of well-being and of progress.

Now it is time **to take the analogy of the built-up infrastructure into the domain of ecology and natural resources and talk about ecological infrastructure, the investment in the maintenance of that infrastructure, the return on investment and the opportunity costs of not investing in it.**

That discourse is one that is just beginning to mature, and it's part of the reason why in UNEP we have included this in the Green Economy initiative and why we are closely connected to The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) project backed by the European Commission and governments including Germany and the United Kingdom.

It is very critical to have that discussion in order to change the nature of the empirical foundations. We have to go macroeconomic. **We have to go systemic on this debate.**

COS: You're also suggesting a “green new deal”? What are you referring to when you make that proposal?

Achim Steiner: Well, the notion of the new deal was driven by essentially two thoughts. Last year we were setting up the Green Economy initiative with a two-year horizon and then the financial crisis crashed on top of us.

We had to quickly decide how to handle this: ignore it and continue our work or quickly deploy ourselves in that debate. And as we started seeing these extraordinary sums of money being mobilized in stimulus packages, it became an imperative to try and influence that discussion to ensure that bailouts and **massive stimulus investments would not only be directed at yesterday's economy and stabilizing yesterday's technologies, jobs, and industries, but also be used to invest in tomorrow's technologies, markets, products.**

That notion had a lot to do with the analogy to President Roosevelt's New Deal. In other words having a crisis, but doing something that also builds capital for a time when the crisis will be over.

The second thought was that we are heading towards the UN climate convention meeting in **Copenhagen** where governments need to craft a global deal but at that time and also now, without real cash on the table.

So the Global Green New Deal argues that as we move towards Copenhagen, **we need to take some of this financial capital that we are mobilizing for the crisis and apply it to the climate change agenda in order to forge a credible deal in Copenhagen.** That is the background to how the global “green new deal” emerged.

From there we stumbled across a similar train leaving the station by. This was the **New Economics Foundation** which had actually talked about a green new deal for the UK—another example of how often great ideas merge at the same time and can capture public sentiment.

Indeed **the notion of green growth and a green new deal has spread like wildfire and is now a part of the Green Party manifesto in Germany and in the European Parliament for example. It has also taken off in the United States and places like the Republic of Korea and China and beyond.**

COS: Where are the places where we could see the seeds of that new economy, of a new sustainable economy in the making?

Achim Steiner: There are two levels at which I would answer this. **One is the remarkable point that that it's already happening and in many places..**

Indeed the idea actually pre-date the current economic crisis. When I was at IUCN I had a long discussion with Klaus Töpfer, my predecessor at UNEP on the idea of setting up an initiative around the green economy concept and linking the economic and environmental discourse.

And over several years, one was coming across examples such as the Brazilian ethanol community whose genesis had nothing to do with the notion of environmentalism but had the objective of liberating Brazil from conventional fossil fuels.

There were also the policies of a country such as Denmark that led to it being a pioneer in energy efficiency and a nation like Costa Rica and its championing of, for example payments for ecosystem services.

So I would urge anyone interested in these green economy stirrings to study the enormous variety of laboratory work that has been happening over the past two or three decades, and in particular in the past ten years.

Secondly to see where you have critical mass that things can and in some places are being scaled up to a level where they really are transformative in a national, regional, and global context. Here I am not sure you will not be able to pinpoint one region only. While Europe has

to some extent over the last decade been the locomotive on many of these experiments, this was in part built on work in the United States that occurred in say the 1970s and '80s..

Perhaps some of the most interesting work is going on right now in Asia, and in particular in China. We will probably look to China over the next decade as being the most risk-taking and also most far-reaching experiment in moving from an unsustainable path to some of the most pioneering and scalable models for achieving sustainability. Then you have the Republic of Korea as mentioned but also **Singapore** and **Indonesia** that are starting from a whole different reality and trying to address these issues. There, let's say, the pathway is less predictable. However **in China I have every confidence that you will be looking at something phenomenal unfolding over the next two decades.**

COS: Looking at the current transformation, what are the key questions that need to be explored now in order to move forward?

Achim Steiner: Probably two. **One is, how do we finance the research and experimentation that allows us to develop new technological, managerial, and business models to address old needs?** There is certainly no limit to human ingenuity or to nature's ingenuity.

Second is the interface between public policy and the marketplace--the private sector is too narrow a concept and for me it's the marketplace where demand and supply, new products, the ability to incorporate new measured standards and norms, new public choices and preferences ultimately have to stand the test of reality.

The most fascinating part of our time right now is that the financial crisis has made us realize that the Chicago school and the Washington consensus were sources of irrational exuberance.

It is time to re-discover that for centuries and probably millennia, **the fundamental laws of how our economies and societies work best are based on public policy choices and public policy frameworks that guide markets rather than the other way round..**

Thus our ability **to beat the timeline and avoid the tipping points of fundamental and often irreversible environmental damage will in large part depend on whether public policy can quickly and intelligently scale up and accelerate the market's responsiveness to these new realities** **The key for governments is to give an expression to public choice that will take the economy along a different set of paradigms, pathways, and opportunities.**

COS: Thank you so much! Is there anything else you wanted to say in this interview that is important to you that I didn't ask about?

Achim Steiner: Perhaps the one issue we haven't talked about so much about is **the future role of the multilateral system that will enable us to make some of these things happen.**

I left what was my happiest job in life, with IUCN for the post of UNEP Executive Director out of the deep conviction that unless we can unlock the intergovernmental dimension to all of this-- which is so stuck in a paradigm and a debate from the 1970s and the disappointments between the South and the North--I doubt whether we will really be able to achieve something meaningful.

However, the challenge of climate change has emerged as an enormous and important cognitive moment. **Neither the United States on its own, nor the multilateral system on its own, will be able to do anything about climate change. That is another fundamental recognition of our time.**

If you look at the United Nations, it was very much a positive locomotive for issues such as human rights, health and development in the 1960s and 1970s but in recent years it has become more of a stage upon which nations and blocs play out their frustrations..

The time is now long overdue where governments need to give serious thought to how the environment and sustainability agendas, based on sound science, become part of an international governance system --not so much as an organization per se, but as a set of principles, norms, standards, accountabilities and recourse mechanisms.

I do not believe that most of the environmental change phenomena we are dealing with can be addressed any longer at the national level – whether because of a lack of resources or because so many of the challenges are related to, for example trans-boundary rivers, or pollution that moves around the world crossing national borders.

How will the multilateral environmental framework evolve in the next few years from being, in a sense, a victim of a kind of containment strategy is now subject to debate.

Yes and of course we had the formation of UNEP in 1972 and since then a growth in a wide range of multilateral agreements. But to be brutal, the landscape that has been evolved seems to be either about how to keep the environmental agenda locked down or how to make sure it doesn't become too effective.

That has been in many ways the status quo and the environmental lock-down for the past 15 years and it is a status quo that is seriously limiting our ability to move forward and move forward we must.

For example, enabling the green economy is not just about economic and trade standard-setting but also about setting environmental and social norms.

What we need is the global equivalent of the pathways taken at the national level in many economies where environmental issues have become part of the legislative incentive and subsidy system. Currently I would estimate that we are about two decades behind when compared with the world trade agenda and its institutional evolution.

I would like to suggest here a really important, potential role for the new United States administration and President Obama.

If the new administration genuinely believes in the value of the United Nations and multilateralism then where could it make a major impact in the next three to five years?

I doubt it will be possible in for example the human rights domain or in the domain of the Security Council for a whole variety of reasons.

Yet given this administration's understanding of environmental change, why not make that major impact in the environmental arena--why not be the catalyst for a fundamental review of the environmental architecture, the financing architecture and ultimately the role of the environment in the multilateral system?

The timeline is interesting because we have a Rio-plus-20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 and that offers a moment and an opportunity to write the next chapter on issues surrounding the global environment.

COS: That's very interesting. So, listening to you, what comes to my mind is to have a meeting at MIT or in Washington where some of the players can brainstorm around that question and explore some possibilities.

Achim Steiner: Absolutely and because we have a process right now to develop over the next six months a high-level ministerial community to come up with a new proposal for a forum at the UN for UNEP.

There is a political space that is going to test the boundaries and come up with a concept of how this reform could look for UNEP's next Global Ministerial Environment Forum meeting in February 2010.

Meanwhile there is also a research project run by Maria Ivanova at Yale university that is focusing on the history of UNEP and environmental governance.

Indeed we had a meeting in Montreux, Switzerland at the end of June, where three generations of leaders in the environmental arena—alongside all the former Executive Directors of UNEP—were brought together with young leaders to look at a way forward.

So the debate is out there, and I am delighted that MIT has also engaged on this important issue. I sincerely believe that this discussion needs to come from an economic imperative in order to see the challenges but also the opportunities differently and to thus generate a very different kind of discourse.

Ultimately, something will happen only if the cost of not acting actually begins to affect economic opportunities.

I believe we are approaching that point from a global context, but we need to create the consciousness, the understanding, the empirical discourse around that topic—one able to convince a major economy such as the Obama administration to then convince others that this is an area worth working towards.

So we have a fascinating issue in fascinating times. Important milestones and platforms are emerging **which means we essentially have to have a core reform agenda on the table by early or mid next year.** Certainly food for thought and I look forward to discussing this with you and your colleagues at MIT in mid-September.

Otto Scharmer: Okay. Thank you so much, Achim. This has been a really fascinating conversation, and we'll continue it in many ways.