



# The Global Challenge of Climate Change

## By Seung-soo Han

**The United Nations has played a central role in galvanizing international expertise on climate change and providing a forum for concerted action.**

**UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's special envoy on climate change, Seung-soo Han, describes what the UN has been doing, and mostly importantly, what the business community can do.**

CLIMATE CHANGE HAS EMERGED as an issue that will determine the future of our planet and the wellbeing of humanity for generations to come. The most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that global warming is “unequivocal.” Scientists tell us that they know with 90 percent certainty that the planet is overheating due to human activity. In other words, the scientific consensus has hardened to the point where the most pertinent question is not whether climate change is real, but rather what to do about it. The broad consensus, as reflected in the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is quite grim.

The adverse impacts of climate change are already beginning to be felt around the globe. The accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is the main reason. If the concentration of these gases is not stabilized, the world's climate system will be further disrupted.

Climate change is a matter of utmost importance and urgency, a major challenge to humanity that must be addressed by sustained efforts over a long period of time. Serious commitment is necessary at all levels of government, the private sector and civil society, down to every individual.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, realized the importance of this issue very early in his tenure and made climate change a top priority of his office. He sees this as a challenge that cannot be addressed without global mobilization through the United Nations, the world body established to coordinate the actions of nations for exactly these kinds of problems.

In this article I shall try to give an overview of what the United Nations has been doing in helping to tackle climate change. I will also turn to what other parts of society, especially the business sector, can contribute.

#### **THE UNITED NATIONS AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

The United Nations is involved in a multitude of efforts to identify and address this major challenge. First of all, the United Nations has provided the authoritative scientific conclusion that climate change is happening and is largely due to human activity. There is now overwhelming consensus around this, thanks to the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The Panel has spoken of the impacts of climate change, especially on the most vulnerable, and on the options available to policy makers to address both those impacts and root causes. The final part of its Fourth Assessment Report, known as the “Synthesis Report,” was released on 17 November 2007 in Valencia, Spain. The awarding of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize to the IPCC and former US Vice President Al Gore is a clear recognition of the groundbreaking work of the Panel and demonstrates that climate change impacts a very wide range of issues, including peace and security.

The UN, through its Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), provides the central forum where climate change negotiations are conducted and agreements reached. The Convention itself and the Kyoto Protocol are the pillars of the international climate change

regime that is currently in effect. It is a good start but it is not enough. We need a more comprehensive and ambitious set of agreements for the period after 2012, when the current commitments under the Kyoto Protocol expire. To get to that, we need to launch urgent and robust negotiations so that any new regime is universally ratified and in force by 2012.

The Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC held its 13th session in Bali, Indonesia, from 3 to 14 December 2007. The parties to the Kyoto Protocol also met at the same time. When this article was written the results of those meetings were not yet known. It was clear, however, that these crucial meetings would shape future negotiations for a post-2012 regime. A breakthrough is needed, a brave departure from “business as usual,” in order to launch the negotiations on a solid footing and within a specified time frame.

To build political momentum for Bali, Secretary-General Ban had earlier convened, on 24 September 2007, a High-level Event on Climate Change. World leaders responded to the call and converged in large numbers on UN Headquarters in New York. In their speeches the leaders expressed the will to tackle climate change through concerted action, and made a strong call for negotiations to begin on a future comprehensive multilateral framework beyond 2012.

In addition, the Secretary-General has made an effort to witness first-hand the effects of climate change in order to raise awareness. In Antarctica he saw the continent’s glaciers receding and melting — a factor that could lead to a

catastrophic rise in sea levels. In Punta Arenas, Chile near the center of the famous ozone hole in the earth's atmosphere, children wear protective clothing against ultraviolet radiation. Finally, in the Amazon — often referred to as the “lungs of the earth” — he observed Brazil's efforts in fighting deforestation and promoting sustainable forest management. But here also, the threat of climate change is real, threatening to transform the Amazon rainforest into savannah.

The international community must now live up to this political commitment by its leaders. With the UNFCCC Conference in Bali as the starting point, intense negotiations are needed to lead to a single multilateral framework that is commensurate with the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The broad parameters are clear: we need an enhanced global response to climate change, involving large-scale adaptation, substantive mitigation, increased sources of financing and an unprecedented push for developing and disseminating climate-friendly technologies.

Every country must be part of an effective global response to climate change. However, industrialized countries, with their greater economic and technological resources, are expected to take the lead in reducing their own emissions. It is often overlooked that developing countries, including the large economies in the Asia-Pacific region, are already taking measures to limit emissions, for instance by improving energy efficiency. Incentives should be offered for enhanced action by developing countries.

A global agreement will have to address all this and provide specific mechanisms and measures under the four pillars of adaptation, mitigation, technology and financing. Of course, this framework, a set of rules under which the response to climate change can be organized. But actual implementation will require the mobilization of all available resources, both in the public and the private sector, from governments, civil society and business, down to the level of the individual and the adjustments we all need to make in our lifestyles. To the extent that the United Nations system is concerned, efforts are underway to cre-

ate a coordinated approach. The objective is to support the process for an international agreement within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, as well as the efforts of member states at national, regional and global levels in tackling climate change.

Concrete support of this kind can already be seen at the national level, where the UN system has the analytical and operational capacity to support countries as they determine their national priorities, strategies and policies for mitigation and adaptation, as well as their policy options for integrated sustainable development. Broader ongoing efforts to strengthen the UN system's response are also critical. Work is already being carried out, and more is expected, in the following key sectors: energy, agriculture and fisheries, water, oceans, forestry, health, transport, disaster risk reduction, population and human settlements, education and public awareness.

#### **COPING WITH THE IMPACT**

The concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere means that a certain amount of climate change is inevitable. We have no choice but to adapt. Thus measures to reduce vulnerability to the impacts of climate change are essential to the global response. Action to reduce emissions must go hand-in-hand with adaptation.

The consequences of climate change are being felt on the efforts to achieve sustainable development, including poverty eradication, around the world. The adverse impacts of climate change can and do interfere with achieving sustainable development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This point was powerfully reinforced in the 2007 Human Development Report. Achievement of the MDGs is not easy to start with, especially for least developed countries and small island states, many of which are already struggling to meet basic needs. Their task is now becoming even more difficult due to the climate change. Rising sea levels, extreme weather phenomena and advancing desertification are some of the manifestations of this alarming situation.

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While climate change will affect all countries, some regions are more vulnerable, primarily due to their location. Generally speaking, regions closer to the Equator - where most developing countries are located - will be harder hit than countries in the northern regions. Many countries in the Asia and Pacific region, already having to cope with desertification, water shortages and flooding, will face more severe challenges in the coming decades.

Climate impacts will exacerbate existing water shortages. According to the IPCC, freshwater availability in most of Asia, particularly in large river basins, is projected to decrease due to climate change that, along with population growth and increasing demand from higher standards of living, could adversely affect more than a billion people by the 2050s.

Climate change will affect the agricultural sector, particularly small-scale and subsistence farmers. While agriculture in some regions may benefit from climate change, crop yields in Central and South Asia may decline by about a third by the mid-21st century. Overall, considering population growth, the risk of hunger is projected to remain high in several countries.

Scientists have singled out delta areas and large coastal settlements as being at special risk

from rising sea levels. Many Asian coastal cities are densely populated, but lack the resources to construct expensive defenses against flooding and rising sea levels. Effective measures to identify risks associated with extreme weather events, and planning for emergency situations, will be of great importance. For instance, while a low-lying country such as Bangladesh cannot afford to construct elaborate defenses against flooding, it has put in place an effective system of early warning and storm shelters.

#### **THE VITAL TOOL: GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP**

If climate change is the challenge, partnership is the tool to address it, like most other challenges, in a decisive and coordinated way. We all have to do our part, to the best of our abilities. And to do that we need to break free of the "old paradigm" that presumed an inevitable trade-off between economic growth and the environment. We must deal with climate change in a positive way that will also enhance the prospects for sustainable growth and poverty eradication.

Governments are responsible for defining goals and establishing the framework for action at the international and national levels. There is a need to deliver a clear and long-term legal framework for action on climate change. This

will in turn enable the private sector to plan ahead and make its own significant contributions towards a global low carbon economy. The business community is being mobilized and demanding such a clear framework.

The role of business is really central. Its ability to determine investment flows and drive prosperity gives it great influence over the pace of innovation, technological change and adaptation. In fact, it is estimated that by the year 2030, up to 86 percent of all financial flows will originate in the private sector. Very large amounts are expected to go into the energy sector, especially in fast-growing developing countries. It is crucial that such investments are directed towards environment-friendly technologies. This means a lot of power, and a lot of responsibility, for those making such decisions and managing these sums. There are opportunities combined with risks, but far-sighted leaders in business, as in every other field, realize that the associated benefits outweigh the long term costs.

One point of entry for business that has not yet fully explored the climate change factor is to subscribe to the “Caring for Climate” Platform developed by the UN Global Compact. Established in 1999, it now has over 4,000 businesses as members. The Compact challenges business to embrace a set of universal principles in the areas of human rights, labor standards, the environment and fair competition. Subscribing to the Platform can be a first step towards more responsible corporate citizenship.

Although the climate and weather are public goods, innovative market mechanisms can play a major role in stimulating action towards addressing climate change. The carbon market is a major economic tool, one that has tripled in value to \$30 billion in 2006 alone. An expanded and improved carbon market is an essential part of the solution, providing an opportunity to be rewarded and recognized for doing the environmentally sound thing.

#### FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Secretary-General has been speaking consistently of our responsibility to future genera-

tions regarding the planet that we shall bequeath to them. For many of us, the serious climate impacts will not be manifest in our lifetime. The Asia-Pacific region is home to over half the world’s population — the youth of today and their children may experience a very different world if we do not summon the will to act.

The challenge of climate change can only be addressed if all the creative forces of humanity are mobilized. If that happens, the outcome can only be good. In the process, of course, we should not forget notions of equity and justice, together with efficiency and effectiveness, which should guide us throughout. This is a struggle against a common enemy, and we need to pursue it with fearlessness and determination, building on the foundation of what has been achieved in human civilization, of which responsibility and solidarity are core values.

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