

Moving Forward on Climate Change: Yvo de Boer Visits New York

By Jonas Hagen

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The top United Nations official for climate change urged Ban Ki-moon to champion the global warming agenda, saying the Secretary-General is "in an excellent position to mobilize the kind of leadership that can help move forward". Yvo de Boer, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), spoke of projects to introduce clean coal-burning technology in China, the importance of stopping deforestation and Africa's increasing concern over climate change on 16 January.



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) meets Yvo de Boer, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, at United Nations Headquarters in New York. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

After the Russian Federation's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol-- the 166-member treaty overseen by the UNFCCC that aims to reduce global carbon dioxide emission and went into effect in February 2005--"there was a lot of euphoria around the world", explained Mr. de Boer, who had met with Mr. Ban on 15 January. However, since then the excitement has died down and "taking long-term action on climate change is getting more and more stuck".

Mr. de Boer identified five views on climate change and the Kyoto Protocol held by: countries like the European Union members, which are willing to move ahead with the treaty and to do more to reduce carbon emissions; those that have backed away from the Protocol, such as the United States and Australia, because "they think it is a bad instrument"; developing countries like China, India or Brazil, which would not follow climate change policies if they jeopardize their main goal of reducing poverty; small island developing States, which call for immediate action as they are already directly threatened by rising sea levels; and, the oil-producing countries, which are concerned about the implications of the Protocol in terms of oil revenues. Mr. de Boer pointed out that "for most countries, the underlying concern regarding climate change has not been the environment; it has been the economy".

In an effort to allay countries' economic concerns and to reach a consensus

on a framework after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012, Mr. de Boer advocated to "bring climate change back to the United Nations and UNFCCC to find a solution that represents all views". He saw the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) as an important tool for a post-2012 regime; under the CDM an industrialized country can gain "carbon credits" that would go towards reducing its own obligations under the Kyoto Protocol, by investing in a developing country's project that will lead to lower carbon emissions.

The CDM can be used to green coal plants that produce electricity in China, said Mr. de Boer. An industrialized country could invest in a project that implements "clean coal technology", as well as "carbon capture and storage"-i.e. carbon comes out of power plant's chimney and is captured and pumped back underground. Developing this kind of technology can be cheaper than cutting emissions in industrial countries, he said, adding further that current CDM projects have already prevented the release of 1.5 billion tons of carbon.

Mr. de Boer said that the Secretary-General recognized the "need to act on climate change issue urgently" and that the "cost of action on climate change now is much lower than the potential cost of inaction". Mr. Ban, who will address the issue in high-level meetings, such as the one he had on 16 January with President George Bush, was in an excellent position to provide leadership on resolving questions related to the Kyoto Protocol and climate change, given the mandate from Member States to deal with these issues, Mr. de Boer commented.

Involvement from the private sector was also essential to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, said Mr. de Boer. "Business is crying out for leadership and long-term certainty. Within the next five to ten years, we will be replacing about 40 per cent of the power-generating capacity in the world. If you are the owner of the power plant and you don't know if heads of Government are going to pick up climate change seriously or not, it will be difficult for you to decide what kind of investment to make", he said. Businesses are important because 52 of the 100 most powerful economies are companies, he added. "We are past the era where you can expect Governments to come up with the solution alone."

Mr. de Boer also pointed out the enormous contribution that would come from saving the world's forests. "Some 20 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions come from deforestation, 80 per cent of which comes from people in tropical regions gathering fuel wood" he said. "So if you could do something to give people in tropical countries access to cleaner energy, it would be great in terms of climate change, deforestation and biodiversity."

Climate change was "rising on the agenda" of African countries, said Mr. de Boer, and noted Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo's recent statement that "Africa is experiencing the consequences of climate change, and the developed world should respond". Mr. Obasanjo would bring up the issue at the African Union conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in mid-January. Mr. de Boer also said a Ugandan representative to the United Nations commented that "a drop in water level in Lake Victoria was affecting 30 million people who depend economically on that lake and on the major social, economic and political instability that could result from the consequences of climate change there".

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