

# Is the United Nations Up to the Challenge?

Bo Kjellén

*Seasoned diplomat Bo Kjellén brings his depth of experience in environmental policy to this analysis of the role of the United Nations in formulating and implementing climate change policy. He joined Sweden's Ministry of Environment as chief negotiator in 1990, heading Swedish delegations in the Rio process and climate negotiations until 2001. He has been chairman of the Swedish Research Council on Environment, Agricultural Sciences, and Spatial Planning (Formas) and a visiting fellow at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, UEA, Norwich. He has received prestigious awards for his diplomatic service, including the Elizabeth Haub Prize for Environmental Diplomacy (1998) and the GEF Global Environment Leadership Award (1999).*



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Almost 20 years ago, in February 1991, the negotiations for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change started in Chantilly, Virginia, outside Washington, D.C. This was the beginning of a long series of climate negotiations within the U.N. framework, based on the scientific findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The importance of this scientific contribution was recognized in 2007, when IPCC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

From the beginning, the United States and member states of the European Union had provided a cooperative leadership, both scientifically and politically. However, when the United States decided not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, European Union leadership became decisive in finally putting into force the protocol in 2005. And now the Obama administration has returned the United States to an active role in the negotiations, giving new energy to the process.

We have learned a lot during the decades of negotiation within the United Nations. Climate has moved from being an issue for scientists, experts, and nongovernmental organizations into the permanent agenda of summit meetings of world leaders. And now, in the face of scientific evidence that indicates overwhelming proof of the dangers of human impact on the global climate system, the urgency of reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases is generally recognized.

However, we also realize that such global action is difficult. Fossil fuels paved the way for the energy and transport revolution that gave a decisive contribution to living standards in the industrialized world. But a large part of the planet's population has not yet benefited from these developments. It is not surprising that the developing countries in the climate negotiations insist on transfer of technology and increased financing for adaptation and continued combat of poverty as a necessary part of a climate deal.

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UN photo/Mark Garten

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon visits the polar ice rim to see the impact of climate change firsthand in June 2009, as part of his campaign for a fair, effective agreement at the COP15 in December.

together. It is the U.N. General Assembly that adopted the Millennium Development Goals in 2000; it is the United Nations that held the major conferences on the environment in 1972, 1992, and 2002; and it is the United Nations that has hosted all negotiating processes on global change: climate, ozone, air pollution, biological diversity, desertification, drought, and regulation of toxic chemicals.

But the question has been raised if the cumbersome U.N. procedures are good enough for translating normative principles into effective action on issues like climate change, with its need for concrete measures and difficult societal effects directly influencing lifestyles and economic structures. Can the U.N. system really deliver?

The question needs to be raised. And it is quite clear that other processes and institutions, such as the G8/G20, the Major Economies Forum (MEF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), or the various regional organizations, all have a role in translating political will to action in their own nations, and, jointly, with other nations around the world, into common action. The climate negotiations have benefitted greatly from the active presence of NGOs. Their advocacy

and expertise have certainly impressed many of the delegates.

But there is no substitute for the United Nations when it comes to really global issues. And nothing is more global than climate change: Emissions of greenhouse gases from all countries accumulate in the common atmosphere. At the same time, climate change is only part of a broader process of accelerating change in natural systems caused by human activities. The human species has now become so numerous and our technological capacity so overwhelming that common action is needed to counter the threats of collapse of life-supporting natural systems. There is no other planet to go to.

So the problem is really not to build another United Nations. Instead we have to ask: How can the United Nations be reformed to meet the requirements of today and tomorrow? Some people would say that this is unrealistic. So far U.N. reform has always stumbled on political difficulties, such as those that met the proposals of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Despite all the

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difficulties, I trust that the ongoing climate negotiations will demonstrate the capacity of the United Nations to provide an efficient framework for cooperative action on global threats. And I firmly believe that there is scope for more general reforms aimed at linking

global political issues with economic and environmental problems of a new character. I hope that the clearly stated ambitions of President Obama with regard to multilateral cooperation would also be instrumental in moving to U.N. reform, perhaps in the direction of providing the existing Trusteeship Council with a new agenda on global survival issues, as proposed by the Commission on Global Governance. We will also need more efficient U.N. processes for facing climate-related and other natural disasters. There is no time to lose. ■

*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*