
Interview with Yvo de Boer Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC

1. Why is reaching agreement in Copenhagen important?

Mankind has already added enough greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to raise temperatures to a dangerous level, and this is already leading to increased incidences of drought, heatwaves and heavy storms. The purpose of an ambitious and effective international climate change deal is to avoid catastrophic climate change and to help the most vulnerable countries adapt. If we fail to address climate change, even travelling and transporting goods by rail will become more difficult. For example, melting permafrost in Russia, China and Canada has caused serious damage to railway lines. And many of the world's main traffic arteries are in low-lying coastal areas vulnerable to rising sea levels. We have only a very narrow window of opportunity to undertake a first dramatic shift towards a low-carbon society and to prevent the worst scenarios of scientists from coming true. The UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen this year will be the moment in history in which humanity has the opportunity to rise to the challenge.

2. What has to happen at COP15 so that it can be termed a success?

The Copenhagen agreed outcome need not resolve all details, but it must provide clarity on four key issues: The first is clarity on the mid-term emission reduction targets that industrialised countries will commit to. Second, there must be clarity on the actions that developing countries could undertake to limit their greenhouse gas emissions. Third, it must define stable and predictable financing to help the developing world reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the inevitable effects of climate. And finally, it must identify institutions that will allow technology and finance to be deployed in a way that treats the developing countries as equal partners in the decision-making process.

3. Is the current global recession likely to threaten a new global agreement on climate change?

Many pundits have been warning that the current economic woes could throw efforts to combat climate change off track. But even the financial and economic crisis is being used by countries such as China and the US as an opportunity to change direction and to shift towards the greening of their economies. For the US, this includes unleashing \$150 billion over 10 years to create five million new "green" jobs, including investments in cleaner infrastructure. China this year announced a \$584 billion economic stimulus package, up to 40% of which is to help bolster conservation, environmental protection, and renewable energy efforts. All this has injected energy into the negotiating process.

4. Are there any encouraging signals for successful agreement?

In Bali, in 2007, the 192 Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change launched negotiations to strengthen action on climate change, to culminate in an ambitious and effective international deal in Copenhagen at the end of 2009. I am confident that a deal will be clinched this year. But the clock is ticking down. There are a lot of important details to be agreed. The remaining time is now incredibly short to conclude what is one of the most complicated international negotiating processes in the world today.

5. Why is transportation important with regard to addressing climate change?

The Transport sector is major polluter, already accounting for slightly more than 20% of global CO₂ emissions. These emissions are projected to double within only 40 years, from 4.6 Giga-tonnes in 1990 to 9.2 Giga-tonnes in 2030. This number does not include emissions from international aviation and shipping - both of which are not subject to limitations under the existing Kyoto Protocol and which show even faster growth rates than for example emissions from road traffic. So it is clear that if the international response to climate change is to be comprehensive, it must address the issue of what is technically known as "bunker fuels."

6. Transportation sector emissions continue to rise. Why is this and what action is necessary to curb this development?

We see the fastest growth rates in transport - and hence in emissions - in those parts of the world which have the greatest economic growth. So developing countries are particularly affected. Secondly, there is a global trend towards shifting passengers and goods from low- to high-emitting modes of transport, so for example from rail to road or from shipping to aviation. Thirdly, many vehicles are remarkably inefficient. The average passenger car today still wastes most of the energy in the fuel it consumes on generating warmth which heats up the environment, not on propelling it forward. And fourthly, almost all transport modes are fuelled with CO₂-intensive mineral oil products like gasoline, diesel fuel or kerosene. So efforts to reduce emissions from the transport sector should address all of these four factors, not least through fundamentally re-thinking how and with which types of fuel we get from one place to another.

7. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was designed to reduce emissions in industrialised countries and to ensure that developing countries are assisted in reducing theirs. But the treaty's Clean Development Mechanism has done little to boost sustainable transport in poor countries up to now. Why is this and what could be agreed at Copenhagen to improve the situation?

It is true that the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism has not resulted in many projects related to the transport sector and a lot more could be done. But there are a couple of projects which can serve as good examples. The TransMilenio rapid bus transport system in Bogotá has both helped to provide more efficient public transportation than was previously available in the Colombian capital and reduced greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollutants. The Delhi metro railway system has used the CDM to finance a state of the art breaking system which captures energy and feeds it back into the metro grid, thus saving about 30 per cent electricity. In the run-up to Copenhagen, countries are discussing how to scale up the CDM and create new mechanisms which would generate funding not least for the transport sector.

8. Seeing that rail is among the most environmentally friendly form of transport - what can governments generally do to boost rail transport and make it more competitive?

Shifting transport activity towards more sustainable transport modes - not least rail - is amongst the key policies and measures that a number of countries have been undertaking in the past. Many countries provide subsidies for public transport at local, regional or national level. However, in order to establish a level playing field and ensure that rail becomes more competitive, much more needs to be done. In many cases, prices for train tickets cannot compete with those for flight tickets. Some governments are already looking into options for ending the existing tax exemptions for aviation. It is clear that business as usual is not an option if we want to reverse current trends and prevent catastrophic climate change. If we can really integrate the costs of pollution into the price of transportation, rail will be a big winner.