

Sustainable development: working today for a better tomorrow

# Shaping the future in a spirit of partnership

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Essay

Environmental politician: As head of UNEP, Professor Klaus Töpfer tackles the global challenges of our time.



**Professor Klaus Töpfer is Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). As a former German Environment Minister, he has experience in raising political awareness of ecological matters. The UN representative spoke to research about global environmental issues and the contribution of industry in the context of sustainable development.**

“Sustainable development” has become one of the keywords of recent years, although those who are not involved professionally are often uncertain what it actually means. “Sustainable development” is one of the most important challenges to man and it means quite simply the creation of living conditions today which will still allow future generations to live with dignity. At the core of sustainable development is the harmonization of ecology, economy and social involvement.

One of the major global challenges of our time is how to successfully combat hunger and poverty in developing countries and offer people long-term

opportunities to achieve a level of prosperity comparable to that enjoyed by the industrialized nations. The specific challenge here is to improve material living conditions in large parts of the world in an ecologically compatible way. Modern environmental technologies are the key to achieving this kind of environmentally acceptable increase in prosperity. Industry in the western economies has reached today’s high environmental standards through constant technological innovation, and globalizing technological standards is the only way to protect the environment all over the world at a high level. The export of appropriate technologies from industrialized countries can thus make a major contribution to establishing manufacturing processes in the third world capable of protecting the environment and making economical use of resources.

High environmental standards will only be accepted by society in developing countries if increased production costs do not impact negatively on socioeconomic development. The replacement of CFCs is one example of a functioning mechanism for the globalization of technological standards. Here, technology transfer is flanked by financial support; the additional costs of cleaner production in the poorer countries are financed from a fund into which the richer countries



Dialog with youth: At the Youth Environmental Forum Eco-Innovate 03 in Sydney, Professor Klaus Töpfer debated with young people from Asia.

pay. UNEP has organized a number of local studies to see how trade and the environment can mutually support each other.

Indeed, it was an industry which has a direct impact on the environment – the chemical industry – that was responsible for setting an example in the past as far as environmental standards are concerned. The International Conventions of Rotterdam, Stockholm and Basle laid the framework for ecologically sound global trade and business. It is also encouraging that more and more companies – such as Bayer, a founding member of the initiative – are supporting UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's Global Compact Initiative and acknowledging its standards in the areas of human rights, labor practices and environmental protection.

As a basic science, chemistry is everywhere in our daily lives – we quite simply cannot do without it. It is also the starting point for the development and application of important future technologies, such as biotechnology and nanotechnology. Biotechnological industrial processes and products have great potential for solving environmental and social problems. We would be well advised to use this potential responsibly.

One central area in which UNEP is working is "capacity building", the personal development of knowledge and infrastructures. UNEP has devel-

oped a special strategy called "Tunza" for the youth: for those who will inherit the world of tomorrow. In Swahili, a language spoken in East Africa, "Tunza" means "to treat something with care and affection". The strategy, with its varied programs and initiatives, has a dual objective: to make sure that the voice of youth finds an audience, because the decision-makers of today are creating the world that these young people will be living in tomorrow, and to strengthen their environmental awareness and promote their knowledge of the environment. The partnership established between Bayer and UNEP this year is particularly important in this respect and pursues precisely this objective, representing long-term successful cooperation in the Asia Pacific region in the area of youth and the environment on a global basis.

The joint projects range from publications and discussion forums to painting and photographic competitions and special environmental networks for youngsters. A prime example of this unique partnership is the Bayer Young Environmental Envoy Program. Young people from Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe who have a particular interest in and commitment to the environment can experience the principles and methods of modern environmental protection at first hand during a week-long study visit to

Germany. Their discussions with Bayer experts and representatives of environmental authorities focus on the complex interplay between government, industry and private households. As envoys in the service of the environment, these young people take home their experiences and new-found knowledge.

The cooperation between Bayer and UNEP is a prime example of partnership between a global political institution and a globally active commercial enterprise: both partners can learn from each other and create synergies in the interest of sustainable development.

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