

## **The future of sustainable development**

**Dr Kandeh K Yumkella** was born in the impoverished African nation of Sierra Leone in 1959. After graduating from the Njala University College in 1982, he pursued his higher education in the United States, obtaining a PhD in Agricultural Economics from the prestigious University of Illinois in 1991.

Dr Yumkella possesses over twenty years of distinguished experience in International Development Cooperation, and has provided leadership for a number of initiatives in the realms of Sustainable Development, Trade, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation, and Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency.

In 2005, Dr Yumkella was appointed the Director-General of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in Austria, and was re-confirmed for a second term in 2009. He has also been appointed as the Chair of UN-Energy, a system-wide coordination body of the United Nations dealing with energy-related issues. In 2009, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon personally selected Dr Yumkella to Chair his Advisory Group on Energy and Climate Change (AGECC) and was again appointed Co-Chair of a High-Level Group on Sustainable Energy for All. Dr Yumkella is a prominent figure in the global sustainable development movement, and is known for his erudition and effervescence at public speaking. He features regularly on international broadcast networks, such as CNN, BBC, and CNBC; and contributes to global newspapers, such as the New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, and The Guardian. Harish Alagappa met Dr Yumkella during *DSDS 2012*, and spoke to him about the importance of the Rio Declaration, the future of sustainable development, and the role of young people in ensuring energy access for all.

**The year 2012 marks 20 years since the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. How much do you think we have achieved, in terms of the goals we set out for ourselves in 1992, and do you think we have done enough?**

Well, since Rio 1992 there has been more interest in sustainability than ever before. However, we have also observed that—particularly with regard to climate change—there has not been enough action as we had hoped. We know emissions have increased more rapidly than they were 20 years ago, so for sure, there is quite a bit of disappointment on that front. But, in some countries—again only in some countries, not many—there has been quite a bit of interest at the national level on issues like biodiversity and industrial pollution. Some countries have taken it more seriously nationally. But, at the global level, we had hoped that by now there would be consensus on many issues—particularly climate change. We have been negotiating since that time and we still do not have the grand deal that we had hoped for. We have not seen much alignment between the politics and the financing. We had hoped that Rio 1992 would galvanize real political will and action, which would be linked up with action on the ground. Since we have not seen that so far, yes, there has been some disappointment.

**Is there a conflict between the developed world and the developing world regarding protecting the global commons?**

During the last 20 years, there has been some finger-pointing as to who is more responsible for problems, such as climate change. But, we think the discussions have evolved; we have recognized now that finger-pointing as to who caused the most damage has not been helpful. We are witnessing more and more avenues where there are dialogues now based on the Bali Plan of Action, and the four pillars: mitigation, adaptation, technology, and finance. The dialogue has improved, but again what has been missing is the real interest of countries to focus on taking more action that is for the global good. With the financial crisis that has been taking place since 2007, it has been very difficult to get political will to agree on some major global goals, environmental goals, and sustainability goals because of national crises that some countries are experiencing. These countries fear that if they make commitments, their economies will slow down even more. The crisis has also prevented governments from thinking long-term; everybody is more concerned about the short-term, with a worst-case of when they are more concerned about the next sound-byte on the television in the evening news that day. If you are concerned about what happens in two hours on the evening news, you will not take action on what we need to do in five, ten, or twenty years.

**What according to you is the main issue when it comes to pursuing the sustainability agenda? Is it the lack of will or the lack of awareness?**

You need political initiatives, and you also need awareness on some specific issues in sustainable development. If I take the example of the energy agenda, which I am helping to lead, I can tell you that while people understand that they need energy access and sustainability, we did not see it mainstreamed enough on the development discourse until we put it on the agenda. About a year and a half ago, we wanted some paragraphs included in a major political document that was looking at the Millennium Development Goals. We could not get those paragraphs in! The politics would not allow it! However, we got mentions here and there about the importance of energy. You and I would say, "Wait a minute! People still do not recognize how crucial energy access is for the Millennium Development Goals?" Dr Pachauri has been talking about how energy access is the missing Millennium Development Goal for over five years. But still, even to get it in a document was not easy, because the politics was not well-aligned. So, I believe that we still need awareness.

Second, some of what we need to do for sustainable development requires changes in our individual habits; how we use electricity, what we do to those appliances in our homes. So, that is why many people do not want to take that responsibility. That is the importance of awareness, and for that matter, communication in general. How do we get global leaders, in business and particularly in parliament, to look at sustainability and say, "Fine, I have to take local action, but I still have to contribute to global action"? That is not easy; I know from some Heads of State and some of your ministers whom I met recently, that they believe in what we are saying about some of the global issues. But, locally, they need to create jobs, they also have to sell [the idea] to their local constituents that it makes sense to make concessions that may have short-term negative impacts on the economy, but has even better longer-term benefits for the global commons. Again on communication, remember we also tried the fear tactic; we told people what would happen in a global disaster if they do not do some things. "The Inconvenient Truth" was told. Well, it did not change policy in some major economies. Some governments and parliaments still blocked energy policies in their countries, because they felt those energy policies would have helped the global commons, but not their national interest. The fear narrative does not work. Maybe we need to talk about the benefits and transformative narratives now: the green growth opportunities that are there, the jobs, the technology transfer, and so on.

### **How do you think India compares when it comes to climate change action in the developing world?**

African countries can learn a lot from India; that was the basis of my discussions with ministers and government officials in India in February 2012. India has achieved success in a number of areas that we need to expose African countries to. When I look at some of the work India has done in waste-to-energy projects; using rice husk to generate power through gasification, and in Coimbatore: where burning coconut shells in a gasifier produces charcoal that can be used in water filtration and also to generate power. These are things we have not done yet [in Africa]. I have seen some of the other technologies on generating methane for cooking in households, and some of what the Indian barefoot engineers and women are doing. And things are happening now; the Indian government is giving a lot of attention to transferring knowledge and technology from India to African countries, and helping them out. So, I think there is a lot we can learn from each other, there is a lot we need from each other. But, my point is that with the similarities we have in terms of problems, India is in many cases light-years ahead of us.

### **The subsidies on non-renewable and renewable energies are the same. Is that not problematic?**

There is no doubt that there is a big difference between the levels of support given to traditional energy sources, compared to alternative or renewable energy. The estimates we have from the International Energy Agency are that in 2009, we had about \$312 billion in subsidies to traditional fossil fuels. By 2011, it became \$400 billion. That is a huge jump. What we are saying is let us level the playing field. If we are going to support fossil technologies so much, we can do the same for alternative energy as well; possibly at the same level, or at least we begin to draw down some of those subsidies where it is feasible. Remember, some of the subsidies are meant to provide access for the poor to energy. For example, in African countries, I would not remove subsidies on kerosene. Kerosene is the poor man's energy for lighting and cooking. But, I would perhaps remove some subsidies for automobile fuel for the middle and upper classes, but even that has to be carefully calibrated. And, the funds generated can be used to support communities and others to have access to renewable energy technologies. Removing those subsidies and supporting R&D in renewable energy technologies can level the playing field a little bit and support alternative energy solutions as much as we have supported fossil fuel technologies for almost over a hundred years. It is not only that, we can use or redeploy some of those subsidies to de-carbonize fossil technologies, because we will be dependent on those technologies up to 2050. But, we can reduce the carbon content of those technologies using new technologies like Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS). Also related to subsidies is the whole pricing issue; the subsidies make the price of fossil fuels much lower than they should be, meaning we are not accounting for the environmental impact. We are scared of imposing a carbon tax, but if you look at the case of Norway, it was done very cleverly. Fifteen years ago a carbon tax was introduced, it was very controversial in the country, but they are used to it now, and it never slowed their growth.

### **What role do you envision for young people in the field of sustainable development?**

I have the opportunity to address young people a lot, at universities and other places, and I generally say that they should be fully engaged in this because it is about intergenerational equity. If we mess up the world now, and leave you all with big debts, not only financial, but also environmental debt; your future will not be as enjoyable as ours. So, you have to engage. Sustainability is about your future. Old folks like me will be gone by when these 2050 issues will be relevant, but you have a stake in this and have to take an interest, because you do not want us passing on environmental debts to you, including financial burdens. At the same time for us, we have to create jobs for you, and this is why you see

some governments are pushing for growth and, therefore, pushing for even more use of energy, continuing the old paradigm of development. It is a difficult trade-off, but perhaps governments may have more confidence if young people are also engaged in finding the solutions for their future. Governments are also scared; if they do not create jobs fast enough, college kids will be on the streets tomorrow morning demanding more.

I learnt something recently from a marketer in Asia. This individual's net worth is about \$500 million, so she knows what she is talking about; she said, "The new force in global governance is TGIF—not "Thank God It's Friday"—but Twitter, Google, Internet, and Facebook generation." You guys have proven in 2011 that you are more powerful than we ever thought you were, because you have information. That information can also help you mobilize on sustainable development. That is a new force; the youth are engaged, it is still disorganized for now, but you know something? In 2011, they demonstrated that they can trigger quick action in some places that you never felt. Maybe you can help us with the energy revolution; we need that energy revolution if we do not want to poison our futures with carbon.

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