

Interview with Dr. Frank Rijsberman, Director-General of the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI)

# Searching for Environmentally Sustainable & Socially Inclusive Economic Growth at the G20

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

How to achieve economic growth that is environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive will be a central theme of global governance as a long-term challenge. How the G20 Summit in Osaka on June 28-29 in 2019 addresses this issue and promotes international cooperation based upon the Paris Agreement, a significant achievement in this domain, will be a point of focus for interested readers.

We were fortunate enough to interview Dr. Frank Rijsberman, director-general of the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI), a Seoul-based intergovernmental organization dedicated to promoting green growth and climate resilience. He was visiting Tokyo to attend one of the preparatory meetings for the G20.

(Interviewed on Feb. 14, 2019)

## Introduction

**JS:** I would like to start by asking for a brief self-introduction, particularly regarding your involvement in the G20 preparatory process.

**Rijsberman:** I am director-general of the GGGI, headquartered in South Korea, dedicated to promoting green growth and climate resilience. We were established in 2012, at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, and we currently consist of 31 member countries around the world and another 20 are in the process of joining the organization. We were pleased that Japan, as the current chair of the G20, asked us to write a background paper for this meeting (the Climate Sustainability Working Group).

The GGGI's *G20 Background Paper: Green Growth* to achieve the Paris Agreement outlines the necessity of an accelerated transition to a green and circular economy that will eradicate poverty, provide decent jobs, and hit climate action targets. The paper includes the GGGI's top public policy, public finance, and private investment recommendations to scale up and accelerate green growth in developing countries.

The transition to a green growth pathway needs to be accelerated to achieve the Paris Agreement. G20 countries can play a key role in building capacity in developing countries, meeting commitments concerning climate finance, and enabling the engagement of the private sectors of G20 countries in project development and



Dr. Frank Rijsberman

investments in the developing world.

The background paper provides recommendations for G20 countries on ways in which they could help accelerate climate action in the developing world. A top priority for developing and emerging countries is to alleviate poverty and create decent jobs for the next generation through achieving economic growth. The green transformation will play an important role in creating hundreds of millions of green and decent jobs, particularly to enhance the role of women in the labor market and provide more opportunities for the future generations.

**JS:** Could you explain a little more about the GGGI?

**Rijsberman:** We are called an institute, which is maybe connected to the original translation from Korean to English as we were originally set up by a Korean initiative. We are not really an institute; we are not a think-tank or NGO. More precisely, we are a treaty-based organization. Countries join by ratifying our establishment treaty. We have staff embedded in ministries of finance, planning, sometimes environment, to help countries work on long-term planning and national development strategies. They help to mainstream the thinking that we need to transition to an economy that still grows in a way that is environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. We help governments come up with national green growth plans or renewable energy strategies, or long-term strategies for the Paris Agreement.

The second thing we do is help them mobilize green and climate

finance to implement those strategies. Over the last two years, we helped our members mobilize over a billion dollars in green and climate finance, which shows that there is a lot more finance out there in the world, but there is a lack of capacity in the countries we work so we help them to access this finance, or to come up with proposals that meet the requirements of investors.

### **JS: The institute was founded originally as a think-tank and then became an international organization?**

**Rijsberman:** It was founded as a Korean think-tank, but then became an international organization in 2012, when 18 countries ratified our establishment treaty and we now have 32 members. The 32nd was Burkina Faso, which officially became a member in April (2019). We know that Uganda, Ecuador, Kuwait, and Nepal are all very advanced in their process of ratification as well, and 20 additional countries are officially in the process of joining. Among these 50 or so countries, some are donor countries, and some are participating countries, where we have operations and staff. We will have staff in 35 countries as of this year, embedded in government ministries for finance or planning, supporting governments in mainstreaming green growth in their national development planning.

We also help them come up with renewable energy projects, or green city development projects or sustainable landscapes, or water and sanitation projects – to transform their economies into a sustainable growth path. In light of the G20 we are particularly focused on implementing the Paris Agreement, and we believe that this green growth planning approach is a very effective way to mainstream green growth thinking into the economy, which is required to implement Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and meet the Paris Agreement. In fact, the No. 1 recommendation from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is that there needs to be a multi-ministerial commitment – not just the ministry of environment or climate change – and it needs to mainstream the NDCs into the economy, which is very much the objective of the green growth planning that we are helping to implement.

## **Economic Growth & Environment**

### **JS: Concerning sustainable growth and the environment, would it be correct to say that most countries agree with this approach?**

**Rijsberman:** I have been in this field for the last 40 years, and during most of that time we had something called sustainable development. We mainly work with the believers, such as the ministry of the environment, but if we approach the ministry of finance, they generally did not want to deal with sustainable development. Their approach was, we need economic growth first and then deal with the environment later. We are now actively engaging with ministries in



charge of finance and planning, and they have now accepted that they need growth, but the quality of growth really matters. South Korea, for example, had a very rapid economic development, but suffers from both yellow dust and fine dust which stop children playing outside due to bad air quality and pollution. So rapid economic growth while neglecting the environment had some very negative externalities and environmental impacts.

There is now a consensus among nearly all leaders that climate change is not something of the future but is affecting us now, including wildfires, floods, persistent droughts and so on. Farmers in Africa too are convinced that the climate has changed and is affecting them today. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report 2018 calls for rapid decarbonization of our economies if we are to live with climate change. The good news is that now there are commercial opportunities to do that. Renewable energy has become cheaper than fossil fuel alternatives, so there are commercial opportunities to implement decarbonized policies. Electric buses and electric cars are becoming cheaper than diesel buses, for instance, in terms of lifecycle costs. There are many opportunities to build green buildings that are cheaper to operate. Governments need to put money on the table and have the right policies, but there are many commercial opportunities for the private sector to engage in this space, and this is a key message.

### **JS: Poverty could cause environmental damage, as with the deforestation in Indonesia. Do you also focus on mitigating poverty?**

**Rijsberman:** There are people who equate green growth with low carbon or environmentally-sound growth, but for us it is a three-legged stool. We need economic growth, it needs to be environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. So we have a major emphasis on green employment, and in the G20 we often talk about “just transition”. There will be jobs lost in the transition from a coal- or gas-based economy to a different one, but then there are

more jobs gained, related to renewable energy, related to producing wind turbines and so on. So “just transition” is the idea that we do need attention for re-training or opportunities for depressed parts of the country where coal mines were located to shift to this new economy. Overall, net-net we believe that the new “green” economy does provide additional employment opportunities. There are opportunities to grow and deal with poverty at the same time.

In Asia, there was a lot of economic growth and a lot of investments in fossil fuels and nuclear energy so there is a high cost of transition. But in Africa, there are many countries where still only between 10% and 20% of the population have access to electricity, so this new transformation to renewable energy could actually increase access to energy and create new growth opportunities in a way that is not carbon intensive.

## Challenges to International Collaboration

**JS: International collaboration would seem to be facing a critical situation today, including the issue of the global environment. How do you see the current situation, where the United States is withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, for example?**

**Rijsberman:** There are clearly many challenges. The Paris Agreement itself did not try to have a single overarching agreement that everybody had to sign up to, but used a bottom-up approach where all countries could voluntarily submit their NDCs, and this has been a breakthrough in bringing people together while recognizing that there are quite important differences among countries. This was a major success of international diplomacy. While it is true that President Donald Trump has announced his intent to withdraw, there is a waiting period of several years, so in the meantime the US is present here and in all the other climate negotiations. There are many actors within the US, from states to cities to companies that are continuing that momentum, and in the current Congress there is a new climate action committee.

China, meanwhile, has confirmed that it will stay. In Asia, the primary driver for green or green tech may not be climate change but air pollution, which causes asthma and kills people all over Asia. Beijing had more blue skies this year than in previous years, as coal mines have been closed and more electric buses are on the roads. China has become a leader in certain areas of clean technology and is commercially exploiting these opportunities, for example in constructing solar panels. In Europe, wind energy provides a thriving industry and many commercial opportunities. Japan is pushing for a hydrogen economy, and various countries are finding out that these could bring a new generation of prosperity.

## Smart Cities, Asian Views on Environment

**JS: Smart cities could contribute to energy saving and**

**environmental protection, and could be made possible through technology, particularly information technology.**

**Rijsberman:** Many technologies make a positive contribution, from renewable energy in batteries as some of the base technologies, leading to electrification and transport. The largest area where we need to see progress is in buildings and infrastructure. In Asia, smart cities are very popular. In Africa they are called green cities as they are often realized through green buildings that are better insulated or public transportation that is electrified, recycling waste into energy and so on. Smart cities are a more high-tech variation of the concept of green cities. It is actually possible to build passive houses – houses that do not emit greenhouse gases in construction or when in use – through smarter use of insulation, and smarter use of district heating or cooling. Singapore was one of the first cities to develop “district cooling” on a large scale. Copenhagen believes it can be a zero emissions city by 2025 – so it is possible to rethink the way we rebuild our infrastructure.

When Rwanda built its new airport, I asked the minister if the airport would be green and he was surprised to learn that he could rethink the design to make it a zero-emission airport that was actually cheaper to construct. So, the new airport in Kigali is likely to be the first green airport in Africa, showing that there are opportunities to build airports and other major infrastructure that can be green.

**JS: Asian countries were traditionally less interested in the environment and have been more focused on economic growth. Having been stationed in South Korea, could you share your thoughts about Asia?**

**Rijsberman:** I think that in the last few decades there has been incredible growth in Asia, during which the environment took a back seat, but now people are confronting air pollution and other impacts and so the mindset is changing. In South Korea there is a new government, which has changed its perspective on energy policy and has increased its renewable energy target from 4% to 20% and this has led to a lot of societal discussion in South Korea. The United Kingdom started such a discussion 10 years ago, when it had close to 50% of its energy coming from coal but in 10 years it has gone down to almost zero. People were worried about energy security but now wind energy has become cheaper than coal and building wind turbines has generated a lot of jobs. A rapid transition took place in 10 years. My expectation is that in South Korea, in five to 10 years from now, there will be much higher ambitions. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender, who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.