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## HONEST BROKER

Interview: UN's Noeleen Heyzer reaches out to business

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# The HONEST broker

INTERVIEW



As under-secretary-general of the United Nations in Asia, Dr Noeleen Heyzer must persuade government, business and civil society that regional co-operation can put the continent back on a sustainable track ⇨

Interview: Craig Hoy  
Images: Adrian Young



ONE WOMAN'S MISSION:  
From her Bangkok HQ Dr Noeleen Heyzer  
wants to drive a new sense of Asian regionalism

**D**r Noeleen Heyzer sits at the heart of a region as diverse as it is populous. As executive secretary of the UN's Economic and Social Commission in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), she is both an advocate for change and a figure frequently lobbied by regional players.

In recent months Asia's tiger economies have fallen prey to the world economic slump, seeing double digit growth slide. As manufacturing boom towns turn to ghost towns, Heyzer warns that the economic shakedown itself threatens to exacerbate the region's already massive disparities. This, she told a recent ministerial meeting, gives rise to three challenges: economic insecurity, social disparities and ecological imbalances.

Yet in spite of Asia's current problems, Heyzer, a Singaporean

national and the most senior UN official in Asia, remains optimistic about the region's future as a leader in the geopolitical framework. "Can Asia provide the answers? Is Asia part of the solution? The answer is 'yes'. Despite all the disparities Asia consists of the economic powerhouses – high growth countries and middle income countries."

She observes that Asia can develop stronger regional markets "but only if you close the disparities". Looking to the scope for UN engagement, Heyzer warns that the level of inequality across the region means the situation is made

**"Business is in a sense very self-interested. We need to play up to the sense of enlightened self-interest"**

more acute by an on-going lack of coordination among countries on key development issues.

"What I am trying to do is bring about a more coordinated Asia," she says with a sure-fired self confidence. "Asia is more integrated with the rest of the world than with itself – there is so much more which needs to be done on intra-regional trade... on transport, and social inclusion."

In a region occupied by "two-thirds of humanity" the UN regional chief wants to break the "country-by-country" mind-set which hinders development and results in, to use UN parlance, "governance gaps". Instead she wants government, business and civil society to develop a "more coordinated, integrated Asia".

Tackling climate change, removing tariff and non-tariff barriers,

developing social protection and greater transport connectivity via road and rail remain key goals for ESCAP, she says. “Now there is an attempt to bring ASEAN together as a sub-region but there are struggles due to development and governance gaps,” she notes. “But there is an opportunity when people realise they have to move from country strengths to regional strengths.”

Turning to the UN’s much-publicised Millennium Development Goals, she says the “on-track countries” in Asia can be harnessed to “provide assistance to the countries which are relatively off-track”. “This means that the issue of trust is very important. People will only accept that if they believe there is goodwill,” she adds.

Heyzer also sees the UN’s mission as integral in fostering that sense of trust: even when it means working with ministers from controversial states including Myanmar, which is once again the focus of moral and political outrage over the suppression of democratic free speech and the trial of Aung San Suu Kyi.

“We discuss very difficult regional issues, but with the idea of finding solutions,” she says. “We are an honest broker, a trusted partner.” The UN tracks the region on the basis of “good possibilities” – bringing, for example, Indonesia and Myanmar together on agriculture issues. “You need to bring them back on track. I use the economic and social development track to do so,” Heyzer tells PublicAffairsAsia.

## Benefits of engagement

EVEN WHERE countries such as Myanmar are concerned, Heyzer believes regional engagement can deliver tangible benefits: making engagement a worthwhile exercise despite the opprobrium from some quarters. “For too long even the UN missed reform at the middle level: the focus was on reform at the country level or reform at the global level. One needs to use the region as a resource,” she adds.

Asia needs to focus more on regional markets by finding mechanisms of integration in economic policy and infrastructure, according to Heyzer. “Economic protectionism is very dangerous and it is not going to work. We have spoken out against it. This is a time for solidarity,” she says. “The stimulus packages are a tremendous way to turn a crisis into a way forward – and to find regional solutions for shared prosperity and ecological sustainability.” The UN’s role involves “developing standards and building consensus... not just for governments but also business”. “Progress needs functioning markets, not just functioning states,” she adds.

The speed and ferocity with which the financial crisis spread through the world reveals the scale of connectivity in the modern world, says Heyzer. “The UN was

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created out of the Second World War. We were trying to create an international system – nations which are united internationally. But that gave way to an interdependent global system. In this globalised world, we need platforms to forge common understanding and common responsibility. This requires a new discussion about the systems of governance and institutions that we create in the 21st century. This is a time of great possibilities, fantastic potential, but also very real dangers.”

Rising to the task of tackling disparities in Asia and globally involves the “big challenge” of engaging with business. To this end Heyzer says she is seeking to “revitalise” the Asian Business Forum. “Business is in a sense very self-interested. We need to play up to the sense of enlightened self-interest,” she says. “Business really needs to understand the social and economic challenges in the context in which it is operating. We need to create spaces, not just inter-governmental meetings, whereby these discussions can happen.”

## The root causes

SO WHILST ASIA’S future is still marred by uncertainties – some driven by failed states, others resulting from a failed global financial system – Heyzer is confident that she can play her part in tackling the root causes of many of the region’s social and economic ills.

“I see myself very much as a driver, a facilitator, a catalyst, and honest broker,” she says. “The UN seeks to establish norms and standards. I want to drive an inclusive and sustainable development agenda. I want member states not just to commit to that agenda, but to realise it. I want to lobby for it. I want to articulate it and support the region in achieving it.”

Heyzer wants to reach out to business to bring it into the heart of discussion and dialogue. “We are living in an information age. As you have a more ethical consumer base you need to reform and transform as well. The earth needs to be managed as one. Its gifts cannot be taken for granted. We need to manage the global good and being a good, ethical business, that is what captures a customer’s imagination.”

Today Heyzer sees parallels with 1994 when the commission was preparing for the Fourth World conference on women and she opened the process up to grassroots movements. “I felt that if there was to be a true women’s agenda for Asia Pacific it had to come from the villages and come from the ground. That conference was not an event. It was a process – we were shaking things from the ground up. The same thing needs to be done at this time with business,” she concludes. □

Dr Noeleen Heyzer was in conversation with PublicAffairsAsia’s executive director Craig Hoy