



Source: De Boer, 20 March 2007, New York, Photo UN7717555, Photographer Mark Garten

DE BOER, Yvo

Dutch civil servant and third Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat, 2006-2010

By **Thomas Hickmann and Sebastian Breuer** · Version 19 November 2016

Was born 12 June 1954 in Vienna, Austria. He is the son of Willem Pieter Lambertus Gerardus de Boer, diplomat and ambassador, and Hedwig Maria Yvonne Licini. In 1981 he married Sophie Welsing. He has two daughters and one son.

Biography

De Boer grew up as the youngest of three children in a Dutch diplomat's family. From early on he lived a life on the move and was raised in various locations on different continents, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Finland, Hong Kong, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and the United Kingdom. Through this nomadic life he became acquainted with the fact that 'there are more people in the world than the tribe you happen to come from' and that 'life is different in different countries and tougher in some countries than in other countries' (quoted in Samuelsohn 2009). He attended a boarding school in Kent, England, where he stayed at Dover College from 1968 to 1975. After his graduation De Boer studied at the Social Academy in The Hague, Netherlands, where he specialized in probation service and obtained a technical degree in social work in 1978. In his first job as a parole officer he tried to understand why people kept committing crimes. Rather than focusing on their relative positions and current viewpoints, he looked for underlying interests, feeling that these were the more significant issues that needed to be addressed. Frustrated at not being able to keep people from repeating mistakes and returning to prison, he abandoned his job. After performing his military service as Cavalry Platoon Commander in the Dutch Army from 1979 to 1980, his fluency in several foreign languages aided him in becoming a civil servant in the Department for International Affairs of the Dutch Ministry for Housing and Spatial Planning in 1981.

In 1984 De Boer started working for the United Nations (UN) Centre for Human Settlements, called UN Habitat, first as Human Settlements Advisor in Nairobi, Kenya and then as Chief of the

Information Office for North America and the Caribbean in Ottawa, Canada. In 1990 he returned to the Dutch Ministry for Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment in a leading position in the fields of housing and public information. He first became involved in matters related to climate change in 1994. To gain a better understanding of the issue De Boer surrounded himself with atmospheric scientists, economists and policy analysts. Given the growing scientific evidence regarding climate change, national governments had adopted the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in May 1992, which laid the foundation for further intergovernmental cooperation to tackle climate change by limiting average global temperature increases. At the first Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, held in Berlin, Germany in March 1995, governments started to negotiate a treaty to introduce legally binding reduction targets for greenhouse gas emissions. De Boer, who was a lead negotiator for the Netherlands, helped to prepare the common position of the member states of the European Union (EU) in the international climate negotiations that culminated in the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in December 1997. He was also engaged in the design of the EU's internal burden sharing arrangement to implement the provisions stipulated in the Kyoto Protocol. In 2000 De Boer was appointed Head of the Climate Change Department in the Ministry and contributed to the transformation of the hitherto divided position of the Dutch government into a single national climate policy. He served as the right-hand man of Minister Jan Pronk, who chaired the sixth Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC in The Hague in November 2000. In 2002 De Boer became Director of the Department for International Affairs in the Ministry, where he was responsible for shaping Dutch environmental policy positions within the EU and maintaining external relations with global partners. Since then De Boer has emphasized linkages between environmental protection and economic development as well as market-based solutions. Secretary of State in the Ministry, Pieter van Geel, often accompanied him on official journeys in order to open doors to high-level politicians and experts. In this way De Boer became well known in political and academic circles concerned with climate change. Actively involved in the work of many international conventions, he served in bodies such as the Environment Policy Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Management Board of the European Environment Agency and the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development. Moreover, De Boer was Vice-Chair of the 14th session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in May 2006.

De Boer's career took a new direction when his countrywoman and second Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC Secretariat, Joke Waller-Hunter, unexpectedly passed away in 2005. On the urging of Van Geel, De Boer applied for the position, although the possibility of success was limited since it was much more likely that Waller-Hunter would be replaced with an individual from another country. In addition, as two Europeans had been appointed to high-level positions in other environmental UN institutions shortly before, it was expected that someone from a developing country would be nominated. In his interview with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan De Boer told Annan that he envisioned the role and function of the head of the UNFCCC Secretariat to be different from the way it had been carried out by the first two Executive Secretaries. These office-holders had mainly focused their activities on the technical support of international climate negotiations and had shied away from stirring controversy. The selection process lasted eight months, with an extra effort to find candidates from the Global South. However, on 10 August 2006 Annan nominated De Boer as the third Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC Secretariat, given his proven experience with international climate negotiations and his ability to handle overly complex situations. De Boer officially started the post on 4 September 2006. Building on his previous professional experience, he brought two key elements to the job. In conformity with his earlier emphasis on the economics of global environmental problems, he sought to integrate a large number of societal actors, particularly from the private sector, in the UNFCCC process through different open-format initiatives, such as a multi-stakeholder dialogue on the Clean Development Mechanism and a discussion process with representatives from the World Business Council on Sustainable Development. Furthermore, he repeatedly called attention to the critical significance of the underlying interests of the Parties to the

Convention: 'If you don't understand what motivated the action, then you can't change the parameters that will prevent a future action of a similar kind' (quoted in Samuelsohn 2009).

De Boer's first chance to put his leadership capacity as Executive Secretary to the test came during the thirteenth Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC in Bali in December 2007. This event brought him public attention and also revealed his emotional engagement. The conference's primary goal was to establish a plan for the negotiation of a successor treaty to the Kyoto Protocol. However, after difficult negotiations and working for days with little or no sleep, the talks stalled due to repeated squabbling over proposals on how to limit global greenhouse gas emissions. Canada, Japan, Russia and the United States (US) rejected some of the key aspects regarding the plan for further negotiations, whereas developing countries urged industrialized countries to do more to reduce their emissions. De Boer warned delegates that failing to come to an agreement might plunge the world into conflict. During the negotiations the Chinese delegation suddenly accused him of deliberately scheduling two meetings at the same time in order to keep the Global South out of the negotiation process. Responding to the allegations, De Boer's voice broke and his staff had to escort him out of the conference hall. When he returned to the hall the delegates welcomed him with a standing ovation. While his emotional outburst gained him the name 'crying Dutchman' in the British tabloid press (Clover 2007), De Boer was also credited with having contributed to turning the meeting into a success. Instead of closing without a clear schedule for the subsequent negotiation round, the Parties agreed upon the Bali Action Plan, which comprised detailed provisions for the next steps towards the conclusion of a new climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol. The adoption of the new treaty was envisaged to take place at the fifteenth Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen in December 2009. Prior to this conference De Boer spent two years travelling around the world to meet and talk with all Parties. Through analyzing their positions, he tried to find solutions that would satisfy economically advanced countries, emerging economies, oil-exporting countries, small island states as well as less-developed countries. After the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, he cautioned against narrow short-term interests and prompted national governments to strengthen their efforts to address climate change.

However, in spite of the long and tedious preparations and the presence of over 120 heads of state and government, the Copenhagen conference in 2009 was marred by bitter divisions between industrialized and developing countries. These resulted in setbacks to the negotiation process, harsh rhetoric and repeated battles over procedural issues. When the negotiations slowed down in the final phase of the conference, a far-reaching agreement became increasingly unlikely. In an attempt to break the impasse on the last day of the conference US President Barack Obama brokered an agreement with the heads of state and government of Brazil, China, India and South Africa behind closed doors. Due to their exclusion, countries such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, Sudan and Venezuela tried to block the agreement. Accordingly, no consensus was reached and the conference only produced the so-called Copenhagen Accord, which did not contain any legally binding targets. During the conference, particularly after the heads of state and government had arrived for the last stage of the negotiations, De Boer was sidelined and unable to use his negotiating skills. After the conference he expressed disappointment and conceded that Copenhagen was not what he had hoped for: 'We were about an inch away from a formal agreement. It was basically in our grasp, but it didn't happen... so that was a pity' (quoted in BBC 2010). Several commentators criticized him for letting a few countries negotiate backroom deals and Todd Stern, the US Special Envoy for Climate Change, characterized the conference as a 'snarling, aggravated, chaotic event' (MacFarquhar and Broder 2010). The widely perceived failure of the conference raised the issue of whether the UNFCCC was the right framework to deal with the climate change problem.

On 18 February 2010 De Boer publicly announced his resignation as Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC Secretariat. He denied that the decision was caused by the failure to reach a new climate treaty in Copenhagen and revealed that he already had lined up a new job before the conference. De Boer also proclaimed that the UNFCCC post was 'the best job in the world but you shouldn't try to do

it for too long, especially if you are married and you want your wife and children to recognise you' (quoted in Adam 2010). He left on 1 July 2010 and Christiana Figueres succeeded him as Executive Secretary, taking office on 8 July. In accordance with his conviction that the real solutions for the climate change problem must come from businesses, De Boer decided to work on climate and sustainability issues from the perspective of the private sector. After his resignation he worked as Special Global Advisor on Climate Change and Sustainability at the global auditing firm KPMG from July 2010 to May 2014. In this capacity De Boer led a team of some 6,500 professionals from over 50 countries and advised corporate leaders on how to respond to the impacts of environmental, social and political changes. In particular, he was concerned with the development of private sector strategies and implementation processes to grasp the opportunities and to manage the risks associated with climate change. In 2010 he also joined the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands as a Professorial Fellow of ICIS, the International Centre for Integrated assessment and Sustainable development, and in 2011 he was appointed Chair of the Global Agenda Council on Climate Change of the World Economic Forum. On 15 April 2014 De Boer was appointed Director-General of the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) in Seoul, Republic of Korea, to serve a four-year term. GGGI was initially launched in 2010 as a non-profit organization that would illuminate practical opportunities for country-led and industry-led progress on the twin imperatives of economic development and environmental sustainability. In 2012 18 member states transformed GGGI into an intergovernmental organization. In this post De Boer succeeded Howard Bamsey and guided programmes in countries of the Global South that aimed at designing and implementing sustainable development policies in areas such as renewable energy, urban planning, land-use and water. On 30 September 2016 De Boer stepped down from this post, following the successful adoption of GGGI's work program and budget 2017-2018, and declared that he would henceforth devote himself to his newest task as President of the Sustainability Challenge Foundation, an international non-governmental organization registered in the Netherlands dedicated to training in consensus building for sustainable development.

Most observers agree that De Boer left his mark on the field of international climate politics. During his term as Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC Secretariat, climate change evolved into one of the most important issues on the international political agenda. He was well respected among national delegations and the majority of negotiators considered him to be competent in terms of process and content. A public official from the Danish Climate and Energy Ministry lauded him as 'the best UN guy we have ever had [who is] not just bullshitting' and it was proclaimed that he 'knew everything and predicted everything that could have happened' (Monheim 2015: 99). He worked tirelessly behind the scenes to reach consensus between diverging national interests and pulled the strings in the background. Not afraid of criticizing countries when he perceived a lack of progress, he also praised them when developments were going in the right direction. Unlike his predecessors, he enjoyed appearing in front of cameras and microphones and used interviews to call for more ambitious action to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. Describing his role in international climate negotiations, De Boer referred to himself as 'the butler' who was no more than the guy who brought coffee and sandwiches (Schwägerl 2008). However, he was also described as a 'climate czar' (Luttikhuis 2009) with a 'moral, insistent and occasionally annoying' communication style, who refused to leave the dispute to politicians (*The Guardian* 2009). By speaking up he chose a path that might place him in the midst of a diplomatic conflict: 'At the end of the day, I'm not a player, I'm in a support role', but 'I do think that you can kick people in the backside and say you need to get serious about defining this long-term response' (quoted in Samuelsohn 2009). Finding the right balance was not easy for him and his style did not come without a price. During his term as Executive Secretary, the UNFCCC Secretariat was occasionally reproached for being in favour of the interests of industrialized countries, at other times of developing countries. Moreover, some people accused De Boer of allying too much with the private sector. Several negotiators were offended by his direct communication style and felt that he was transgressing his role and acting too much in the foreground. Bert Metz, a former Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, stated that De Boer's

public statements were 'on, and sometimes over the edge of what is acceptable to the countries' (Luttikhuis 2009).

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