

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV: PROPHET OF CHANGE

FROM THE COLD WAR
TO A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

Compiled and edited by Green Cross International



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Achim Steiner

No 80th birthday celebration for Mikhail Gorbachev would be complete if his significant contribution to the environment was not acknowledged on this special day.

Many will quite rightly point to his achievements as a key architect behind the reforms that swept the Soviet Union in the later half of the twentieth century and which led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

But none should ignore Mr Gorbachev's campaigning on the links between environment and peace – and on the challenges to humanity of breaching ecological limits: these rank alongside the end of the cold war as one of his outstanding accomplishments and legacies.

Green Cross International, which he founded one year after the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, has played a pivotal role in catalysing action on the safe decommissioning of conventional and chemical weapons in Russia while bringing former military bases back into civilian use.

But this work has expanded geographically and in cooperation with many partners including the United Nations. In many ways this has helped lay the groundwork and direction for various other transformative initiatives operating in the world.

These include the Environment and Security Initiative in which UNEP, the UN Development Programme and many others including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe are members.

The focus has been in part on the pollution hot spots that have been left by the Soviet Union, many of which are trans-boundary in terms of their potential to cause environmental damage and disasters and thus trigger tensions between communities and countries.

The work that Green Cross has undertaken and which has been complemented by other organisations is also premised on the way environmental cooperation can act as an important catalyst for preventing conflicts, building trust and promoting peace.

These are the same principles underpinning the work of UNEP's post-conflict and disaster management branch, created after the war in the Balkans, which has carried out assessments and cooperated in clean-ups in countries ranging from Afghanistan and Iraq to Liberia and Lebanon.

Mr Gorbachev's central role, along with former UNEP Executive Director Maurice Strong, in the 2000 Earth Charter must also go down as an inspiring attempt to crystallise the principles of sustainability

alongside concepts of ecological integrity and social and economic justice.

The Earth Charter has since achieved resonance across the world and has been endorsed by organisations from UNESCO and IUCN to cities, religious groups and non-governmental organisations.

The Charter has had its critics too, but such is the nature of an idea which is essentially disruptive in terms of challenging the status quo.

Indeed Mr Gorbachev stands out as one among a few who grasped early on the kind of wide-ranging ideas that have now evolved into the concept of the Green Economy – an initiative that underlines that the future sustainability of the human race and of the global economy will hinge on a transition to a far more low carbon, resource-efficient path.

This is also a path that factors in the economic importance of the Earth's natural and nature-based assets, particularly in respect to the poor, and understands that there are limits to the extent to which these assets can be mined before fundamental 'tipping' points are reached that may turn nature into a wasted rather than a productive resource.

'Man has exceeded nature's allowable limits. Civilisation must adjust to the laws of the biosphere. We have little room for manoeuvre – and little time,' he argued in an essay in *Time* magazine in 1998.

And he added, well before the financial and economic crisis of 2008, 'Our main goal is to help set in motion a value shift in people's minds. Our environmental education programmes ... aim at helping people understand a simple truth: man is not the master of nature but just a part of it.'

Like many environmentalists, who have grasped that fundamental truth concerning humanity's place in the wider, natural world, Mr Gorbachev's ecological perspective grew from working on the land and later through trying to manage human-made natural disasters.

It was when working on a farm in a Soviet collective that he witnessed first hand how unsustainable management can trigger erosion of soils and pollution of water and air.

And later, while working as a Communist Party official for a natural resources commission, he saw how poor construction and unsustainable operations of irrigation and hydroelectric plants can turn fertile into barren land while harming both the freshwater and marine environments.

He further witnessed first hand the critical environmental, strategic and social importance of water resources as State Secretary for Agriculture when he was faced with the terrible calamity of the Aral Sea

while personally intervening to prevent projects that would have diverted rivers in Siberia.

The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident was also a formative 'watershed' experience that triggered a widespread rethink of nuclear power and the closure of old and polluting industrial facilities across the Soviet Union.

Mr Gorbachev has quite rightly won many awards for his environmental work including the 2008 Energy Globe Award and a special prize under the 2010 German Environmental Awards for his work on environmental protection and – his twin passion – campaigning to avert climate change.

German President Christian Wulff called his work 'ecological perestroika', drawing a green analogy to Mr Gorbachev's political reforms and restructuring during his time as Soviet President.

In 2006, UNEP honoured him as one of our Champions of the Earth, describing Mr Gorbachev as an individual who has striven to prevent conflict over shared water resources including mediating between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East.

'He has personally supported through Green Cross water conflict prevention initiatives in Africa, South America, Central Europe, and in his own native river basin, the Volga. His involvement has been critical to breaking deadlocks and encouraging parties to negotiate,' said the Champions of the Earth laudation.

'In 2003, he launched a Local and Regional Authorities Water Initiative aimed at strengthening decentralised cooperation and North-South solidarity to provide drinking water for the world's most desperate people while respecting local cultures and ecosystems,' it added.

In terms of awards, there can be few, if any, higher accolades than winning the Nobel Peace Prize, which Mikhail Gorbachev did in 1990 for his achievements in terms of nuclear disarmament and for his part in ending the cold war while ushering in a new chapter of freedom for the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe.

If the Nobel Peace Prize committee were awarding Mr Gorbachev the same prize in the year of his 80th birthday, the citation might carry some additional and poignant remarks.

Ones that underline that peace in the twenty-first century will depend on keeping the missiles firmly in their silos and eventually eradicating them from the planet, but also on better managing the planet itself in ways that allow resources to be shared and to be shared sustainably.

Mr Gorbachev's role in cementing within the global consciousness

these essential realities, ones that become ever more central on a planet growing from over six billion to over nine billion people by 2050, is an achievement many have striven to emulate.

Indeed, as we celebrate his 80th year, history may prove that Mr Gorbachev's work on the environment will eventually become the most enduring legacy and real peace dividend of the writings, speeches, actions and campaigns of this quite remarkable man.



Achim Steiner, a UN Under-Secretary General, has been the Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) since 2006 and the Director-General of the UN Offices at Nairobi since 2009. Prior to joining the UN he served as Director-General of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) from 2001 to 2006. UNEP and Green Cross

International work together on a variety of issues and initiatives, including the Green Star Awards.