All must innovate in this time of climate change

By Konrad Osterwalder

To say that climate change is the greatest threat facing humanity is both a necessity and a simplification, because the threat, although very real, is not singular but manifold. Extreme weather, desertification, loss of biodiversity, increased water scarcity and the conflicts this will incite are all troubling enough taken individually. Considered together, they represent what the United Nations secretary-general has called “one global challenge.”

Our global response to this challenge will determine not just the shape of the world for future generations, but perhaps its very viability. To the various effects of climate change, all of which are already obvious, especially in the developing world where the ravages of climate change will have the greatest and most tragic impact.

A study last year by the United Nations University's International Network on Asia-Pacific Health (UNU-INWEH) concluded that climate change was making desertification “the greatest environmental challenge of our times.” One billion people in 100 countries are immediately vulnerable to the effects of climate change, but in the not-so-long term that number will include us all.

The intertwined effects of climate change present a clear and present danger to both the natural world that sustains us and to our accustomed ways of life. Yet, within the threatening uncertainty facing humanity lie tremendous opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship and investment if we can face this global challenge.

The question is, of course, are we up to the task? Can we face this challenge and can we face it well? I hope and believe, as a father and grandfather, and as a scientist and head of a UN organization, not just that we will but that we can.

In his statement to the leaders, he said, “Global warming has reached a level such that we can describe with a high degree of confidence a dependence between the greenhouse effect and the observed warming. Certainly further study of this issue must be made.”

In the time since then, the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, co-recipient of last year’s Nobel Peace Prize, has made clear to all, including politicians, scientists and the public, the science behind climate change.

Today at United Nations University Headquarters in Tokyo, I will have the pleasure of welcoming Dr. Hansen, the head of NASA’s Goddard Institute of Space Studies, to the stage for our G-8 Symposium called “Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the Time of Climate Change.”

In this event, he will, together with a dozen of the world’s leading climate change experts, discuss not just science but solutions.

We will explore the opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship, for new technologies and markets, and for new ways of thinking about this greatest of challenges. We are both invited and challenged to enlist the help of such experts.

But beyond the shared awareness that we strive to foster, climate change calls for innovative action. It is time for courageous decisions from the G-8 in the first place, and also from the whole international community.