

## ALTERNATIVE ENERGY AND THE AMERICAS

# Growing Clean

Harley Shaiken Interviews Ricardo Lagos, May 2009

HS: You have said that being a part of the solution when it comes to global warming and clean energy is an unavoidable challenge for developing countries. Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

RL: Developing countries have to have growth because we are still a long way from developed countries. However, at the same time, that growth has to be made in such a way that we are also able to decrease emissions. I know that it is possible to have growth without increasing emissions using new, currently available technologies. And this is the major challenge that we have: How are we going to be able to grow without increasing energy consumption? Why is this so important? By the year 2050, there will be nine billion people on this planet, and all the studies will tell you that those human beings will not be able to emit more than two tons of carbon dioxide per year without putting the security of the planet in peril. And that is a tremendous challenge for both developed and developing countries.

HS: You say that Chile ought to assume a position of leadership in clean growth through a matrix of renewables as well as through the generation of ideas and proposals. Could you elaborate on that?

RL: Chile has been a pioneer in promoting growth while at the same time applying social policies that increase the safety net and improve social conditions in the country; we have been able to grow while also reducing poverty from 38 percent to 13 percent in just 16 years. I think the combination of growth with equity — plus democratic values and respect for human rights, of course — makes Chile well-placed to take on an additional challenge. We need to have growth, but now it has to be growth without increasing emissions.

In 1990, 75 percent of the energy used in central Chile came from hydroelectric sources. Today it is only 50 percent. We turned to natural gas imported from Argentina, but

since those gases are no longer available, we have had to turn to coal and oil. I hope this will change by the middle of this year, when a liquefied natural gas plant will come online in Chile, and we will return to gas. Nevertheless, it seems to me that we need to continue to look for alternative solutions.

In this sense, Chile is very fortunate to be home to the Atacama Desert, one of the best places on earth to get energy from the sun. I think that the Atacama is where we should look for alternative sources of energy, and that is why any new developments in solar energy are very welcome in Chile. If Chile is to continue to grow while increasing energy efficiency, it will be necessary to invest in new technologies. I think that solar and wind are two of the alternatives that we have to evaluate.

HS: What are the major political obstacles to moving in that direction in a country such as Chile?

RL: The major one, I would say, is that until recently people have thought that it is much cheaper to produce energy from coal. The problem is that we are a long way from finding technologies that allow us to capture and sequester carbon. Therefore, if we remain dependent on coal, we are not going to have a matrix of energy sources that allow the country to

project a green image. And I think that it is possible to go in the right direction.

There are also some hydroelectric projects that can be developed — a total of about 1,000 megawatts in several hydro projects in central Chile and a 2,800-megawatt dam in Patagonia — but these projects are expensive and have to be analyzed in terms of their environmental effects. I think the challenges these projects face can be overcome, but Chile's need for energy is going to be much greater than what we can get from hydroelectric sources. If we keep relying on coal, emissions will continue to increase, and that is not acceptable. While it is true that the government is taking steps to make more efficient use of our energy,



Ricardo Lagos addresses the UN.  
Photo courtesy of the United Nations.

which is a move in the right direction, I think much more has to be done. The issue of deforestation will also have to be addressed.

HS: You have mentioned development and the importance of solar in the Atacama Desert. Do you view adopting a technology such as photovoltaic solar as possibly generating jobs and development in Chile?

RL: I think so. There have been tremendous improvements in technology. I think that in the future every house, office and big building is going to produce energy. In the future, in this century, the boundary between producers and consumers of energy is going to become cloudier because you may be a producer in the morning and afternoon and a consumer in the evening and at night. I think this is something to keep in mind. More developed countries are already requiring that new houses include some kind of renewable energy, like solar or wind, and I think that we should also look in that direction. And the kinds of solutions that Stan Ovshinsky is proposing should be available in Chile. Photovoltaic material like the kind United Solar produces is going to be very important.

HS: One final question: How might the new administration in the United States partner with Chile and other countries in the region on issues related to climate change and also related to renewable energy?

RL: After the very recent summit in Trinidad and Tobago, I would say that President Obama is pursuing policy in two directions. First, domestically, he is saying, "Look, the package I have introduced to invigorate the American economy is going to be a huge investment, but part of that huge investment will be in new technologies that will allow us to have new sources of energy." Secondly, he called for cooperation between countries in the hemisphere, and one of the areas he mentioned specifically was energy. I think that we, the developing countries here in South America, are going to have to better integrate our own energy resources while at the same time advancing in such a way that we can benefit from new technologies being developed in the United States. Cooperation in this area will be essential. It seems to me that, in the long run, cooperation on energy policy will be good for the U.S. and good for Latin America. And Chile would like to play a role in that cooperation.

Ricardo Lagos was president of Chile from 2000 to 2006.

A future hotbed of solar power? The Atacama Desert in northern Chile.



Photo by Carly Lyddiard.