
Beijing: The carbon-cheating Games

According to the Chinese Technology Minister Wan Gang, the Beijing Olympic Games will result in the release of some 1.18 million tonnes of carbon to the atmosphere, “in part because so many athletes and spectators were traveling long distances”. However, we need not worry about this, because the Chinese authorities assure us that the Olympics will be “basically” carbon neutral.

This is of course impossible. No-one can be “carbon neutral” once the fuel needed for “traveling long distances” (mostly by fossil fuel-powered planes, buses and cars) has been used. The carbon stored in that fuel will have been released, thus increasing the net amount of carbon in the atmosphere, by adding the carbon that had until then been stored in underground oil deposits. In the case of the Beijing Olympics, this will result in an additional 1.18 million tonnes of carbon that will contribute to increase global warming.

The problem is that many people honestly believe in the possibility of becoming “carbon neutral”, mostly because –as the saying goes- “a lie repeated often enough becomes truth”. And this particular lie is being constantly repeated by numerous “experts” with much to gain from carbon trading and even by some supposedly “green” organizations.

Such is the case of the well-known WWF (which has a panda bear as its logo), whose Chinese section has created a special web page for facilitating payments for becoming “carbon neutral”. The site explains that “Through its Go for Gold global campaign, WWF is also calling Olympic athletes to commit to a carbon neutral trip for the Beijing Games by donating the equivalent of the carbon cost of their flight to a Gold Standard climate-change offset project.” WWF-China even recommends five specific “sales points”: www.climatefriendly.com, www.myclimate.org, www.atmosfair.de, www.nativeenergy.com, www.tricoronagreen.com

The above quote lends to believe that by paying –“donating”- a certain amount of money, the carbon released by the plane, bus or car will be made to disappear somewhere by someone doing something that will “offset” those emissions. Paraphrasing a well known film, this is in fact “Emission Impossible”.

However, people are made to believe that a number of measures, that can be useful in themselves, but that bear no relationship whatsoever with “neutralizing” fossil fuel carbon emissions, can result in them achieving the “carbon neutral” status. For instance, there is no doubt that energy saving measures, energy efficiency, the use of solar, wind and geothermal power, the reduction in the use of cars, are all positive steps in the right direction. The problem arises –as in the case of the Beijing Olympics- when the organizers claim that these measures will ensure that the Games will be “basically” carbon neutral. They will not.

What is necessary for truly addressing the problem of climate change is to drastically reduce and eventually eliminate the use of fossil fuels. This is not an issue of individual choice about being “carbon neutral”, but a political issue that needs to be dealt with at that level. In this case, the pressure –and guilt- must not be put on the Olympic athletes –who will have enough trouble in finding

sufficient oxygen in the polluted air of Beijing- but on the governments that continue to promote a development model based on fossil fuels and environmental destruction.

The Beijing Olympics may have a successful outcome from a sporting perspective, but they will not have the “positive effect on climate change” claimed by Chinese minister Wan and will certainly not be “basically” carbon neutral. Trying to greenwash 1.18 million tonnes of carbon may prove to be a difficult endeavour.