

Convention on Climate Change

Privatising the Atmosphere?

The solution to climate change --which is already happening and being suffered by millions of people around the world-- is in theory quite simple: to substantially reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide. The majority of those emissions result from the use of fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas), whose carbon was safely stored under the earth's surface. The extraction of vast and increasing volumes of fossil fuels is at the core of the current climatic crisis. There are other sources of greenhouse gas emissions, among which deforestation --which releases the carbon dioxide held in the woody biomass of the forest-- which also need to be addressed, but by far the major cause is fossil fuel use.

The Carbon Dealers Market

The way to reduce the use of fossil fuels is to replace them as quickly as possible with environmentally-friendly sources of energy. Such a solution is technically feasible, but very powerful forces --such as the oil industry-- and a number of industrialized-country governments are opposing this approach, claiming it to be too expensive.

However, given that the public is increasingly concerned over climate change, those same forces and governments need to give the world a positive message to the effect that they are dealing with the problem. In 1997, industrialized-country governments finally committed themselves to reduce emissions in the Kyoto Protocol of the Climate Change Convention. Although those commitments were far from the emission cuts needed to adequately address the problem, they were at least something. But they simultaneously invented the ingeniously-named "Clean Development Mechanism" (CDM) in order to avoid compliance with even those insufficient commitments.

This mechanism is far from "clean" and is in fact both a licence to pollute and a new form of colonialism: instead of cutting emissions at source, it allows Northern industries to "compensate for" emissions by implementing projects in other countries. Some of the possible projects involve vast tracts of tree plantations that would allegedly act as "carbon sinks". A U.S. senior official candidly told Reuters: "If you remove a ton of carbon from the atmosphere through carbon sinks then that is the same as avoiding a ton of emissions through fossil fuels" and added that "by counting how much carbon is absorbed through forests and farmland, the pressure would be greatly reduced on U.S. companies to cut emissions and other gases." And that's the objective of the CDM: not to reduce emissions but to **reduce pressures to cut emissions**, particularly in the North..

However, what the earth needs is precisely the opposite. The transfer of carbon from fossil fuels to the atmosphere cannot go on indefinitely. Some 4,000 billion tonnes of carbon in fossil fuels are still under the earth's surface, which is more than ten times the amount of

carbon stored in forests. Adding as little as few hundred billion tons of this to the air would likely result in a climatic disaster. What's thus needed first and foremost is to prevent the extraction and use of those fossil fuels by replacing them with clean, renewable and low impact energy sources and energy efficiency measures. Such would be the meaning --at least from a climate perspective-- of a Clean Development Mechanism. Climate negotiators have perverted the meaning of those words to create a CDM which is in fact only a Carbon Dealers' Market, through which some will economically benefit at the expense of the world's climate.

Tree plantations as sinks must be sunk

One of the main aims of some industrialized-country negotiators at the Convention on Climate Change is to have plantations accepted as carbon sinks within the so-called Clean Development Mechanism. The reasoning seems quite straightforward: while trees are growing, they take carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and fix the carbon in their wood. They thus act as "carbon sinks" and therefore help to counter climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

The first problem is that tree plantations are not aimed at supplementing measures adopted to reduce the use of fossil fuels. On the contrary, their aim is to allow industrialized countries to meet their reduction commitments without actually reducing them to the extent agreed upon. If, for instance, a country has made a commitment to reduce fossil fuel emissions from 100 to 90 units, then instead of reducing by 10 it could reduce by only 5 and plant trees to absorb the remaining 5.

Secondly, a widespread trade in tree plantation "offsets" would block or undercut necessary and urgent measures such as energy conservation, consumption reduction, more equitable resource use, and equitable development and sharing of clean, renewable and low impact sources of energy.

The above shows that "carbon sink" plantations are not a solution to the real problem, which is the continued use of carbon reservoirs --coal, oil and natural gas-- that is at the root of the current climatic crisis. At the same time, plantations are a problem in themselves for many reasons:

- Large-scale tree plantations are already a threat to communities and ecosystems the world over. If the Conference of the Parties were to accept carbon sink plantations as part of the Clean Development Mechanism, it would mean that millions of hectares of new plantation land would have to be taken over in any attempt to counteract even a small fraction of industrial emissions. Experience with large-scale tree plantations indicates that such "offset" projects would usurp needed agricultural lands, replace valuable native ecosystems, deplete water resources, worsen inequity in land ownership, increase poverty, lead to evictions of local peoples, and undermine local stewardship practices needed for forest conservation.

- Large-scale tree plantations are commonly a direct cause of deforestation. This means that before they become a "carbon sink" they in fact cause "carbon leakage" (to use the climate

negotiators' obscure language). That is, carbon that was safely stored in forests is released through deforestation. The carbon balance is thus negative, because most forests store much more carbon per hectare than any plantation.

- Large-scale tree plantations are also commonly an indirect cause of deforestation. People displaced by plantations are usually forced to enter other forest areas and to open them up in order to meet their subsistence needs. These constitute further "leakages."

- Large-scale tree plantations destroy animal and plant diversity and should therefore not be promoted by governments who subscribe to the Convention on Biological Diversity --the same countries, by and large, as those who subscribe to the Convention on Climate Change.

Apart from all the above, there are scientific uncertainties both regarding the capacity of plantations to act as carbon sinks and the capacity of technocrats to adequately measure the carbon sequestered as a result of a plantation. In order for a plantation "offset" project to be tradable for a given amount of industrial emissions, a single determinate number would need to be calculated to represent the amount of carbon sequestered or stored as a result of the project over and above what would have been sequestered or stored in its absence. Such a determinate calculation is in fact impossible.

In sum, "carbon sink" tree plantations cannot be realistically considered a solution to anything, but rather are an additional problem. All efforts must be made to avoid their being countenanced at the upcoming Conference of the Parties. These "sinks" must be sunk.

Putting the carbon debt on the negotiations table

The external debt is a heavy burden for Southern countries especially for the poorest ones and for the poorest sectors within them. Governments implement IMF/World Bank-promoted structural adjustment programmes in their economies to ensure punctual debt servicing, which divert funds that could otherwise have been devoted to satisfying basic needs of their population, such as food, education, housing and health.

However, many are now posing the question: who owes who? In fact, Northern countries have historically based their prosperity on the exploitation of territories, resources and people in the South, and on the invasion and occupation of indigenous peoples' territories throughout the world. The appropriation of the atmosphere by Northern countries to use it as a garbage dump for carbon dioxide is but another chapter in this long and unfair story. Even though the atmosphere is a common good of humanity and every person on Earth has the same right to use it, differences are nowadays dismal. On a per capita basis, the US currently uses twelve times what it should be entitled to, and the UK nearly six times its share. But at the same time Bangladesh --one of the most vulnerable countries to sea level rise and other climate alterations-- is ten times below its quota, Sudan 15 times, Tanzania 22 times, and so on.

According to Christian Aid, "the human economy is emitting approximately 7 billion metric tonnes of carbon per year (1996) and reductions in the order of at least 60% are

necessary to achieve a carbon balance, i.e. to 2,800 million. If we assume that the developed (OECD) countries contain around 20% of the world's population then their sustainable quota should be 560 million tonnes. However, they are presently responsible for around 50% of all carbon emissions, i.e. 3,500 million tonnes, a deficit of approximately 2,940 million tonnes." (Who owes who? Climate change, debt, equity and survival, 1999)

It is clear then that industrialised countries have greatly overused their carbon emissions quota, generating a Carbon Debt which is much larger than the conventional debt of the highly indebted poor countries.

If Southern country governments are really interested --as they should be-- in defending their peoples' interests, they should change the current market-oriented discussions going on under the Climate Change process. The issues of justice and ecological rights at the global level should be the priority. Only then economic instruments could be used to negotiate in positive terms. Instead of happily getting on the bandwagon of getting some money from false "solutions" such as tree monoculture carbon sink plantations, Southern country governments should collectively demand the payment of the Carbon Debt generated by the North. Justice should be the starting point of all negotiations.

A truly Clean Development Mechanism

While climate change experts are trying to find "economically-viable" (meaning cheap) ways out of the climate mess created by Western-style economic development, indigenous peoples and local communities in many countries are in fact implementing a truly Clean Development Mechanism: they are banning oil and gas exploitation in their territories.

Local peoples preventing oil extraction are not only paving the way for a transition to clean, renewable and low impact energy sources, but are at the same time keeping the carbon contained in fossil fuels safely stored under the earth's crust. They are not inventing clever ways to solve the effects of fossil fuel consumption; they are directly attacking the root cause of the problem: the extraction of oil and gas.

These peoples are benefiting humanity, but instead of receiving money for the service they are providing, what they usually receive is repression. They may be branded as enemies of the Motherland, or as subversives or simply as terrorists. Many have been murdered, imprisoned, tortured. They are not acceptable within the "carbon market" elite in spite of being the ones that truly act to prevent climate change. Every barrel of oil which is not extracted is a positive contribution to climate change and millions of barrels are still under the earth as a result of their struggle.

In Colombia, the U'wa indigenous peoples have so far prevented oil extraction from their territory by Occidental Petroleum. They are currently preventing the exploitation of the Samore Block, with an estimated 1.5 billion barrels of oil.

In Ecuador, the Cofan people closed down the Dureno well in Amazonia, containing some 1,265,370 barrels of oil.

In Venezuela, the Warao people managed to get British petroleum out of their territory, containing an estimated 820 million barrels of oil.

Also in Ecuador, the Huaorani people managed to halt for a number of years the implementation of the ITTI (Ishpingo, Tambacocha, Tiputini, Imuya) project within the Yasuní National Park, with an estimated 265 million barrels of oil and part of the territory has been now declared intangible and therefore closed to oil extraction activities.

In Nigeria, the Ijaw people closed down the existing oil wells in their area, in an operation carried out by the Ijaw youth in January 1999, which they named "Climate Change". A tentative estimate of the oil and gas thereby prevented from being extracted is difficult, but can be estimated at some 6 billion barrels.

There are many more examples of struggles, some of which have at least managed to delay oil or gas exploitation --such as the Chad-Cameroon pipeline, the Burma-Thailand Yadana pipeline, the Peruvian Camisea gas project-- while others are struggling against the combined forces of governments and oil corporations to defend their territories against oil exploitation.

All those struggles are an example of a truly Clean Development Mechanism. Local communities preventing oil exploration are entitled to support and compensation for keeping fossil fuels safely stored in perpetuity. Instead of playing around with false solutions, the Convention on Climate Change should support a moratorium on new oil and gas exploration. But those issues are precisely what many climate negotiators try desperately to avoid, precisely because they target the main issue: fossil fuel extraction. Instead of focusing on addressing climate change, they will try to focus on business opportunities and this is what the carbon offset market offers: money.

Equal rights to the atmosphere

A representative of one of the consultancy firms involved in the carbon market (Mark Trexler) has estimated that carbon trading could amount to US\$40-100 billion a year by 2020, while the World Bank --another promoter of this market-- projects a figure of US\$ 150 billion. By the year 2050, the Electric Power Research Institute predicts a US\$ 13 trillion market.

The above calculations obviously don't take into account that some island countries may by then have disappeared under the sea, that millions of people will have drowned, that many more millions will have had to face starvation or migrate elsewhere, that hurricanes, droughts and floods will have devastated entire countries, that the Earth's ecosystems and the living organisms they contain will have dramatically changed. From their "cost-benefit analyses" all those problems do not count. It's part of the "cost" --suffered by others.

However, the world's peoples still have the possibility of not allowing the atmosphere to be privatized in order to use it as a carbon dump, nor may they allow the powerful to buy up rights to pollute still more of the atmosphere or to seize and degrade vast areas of land with "carbon-sink" tree plantations.

The rallying point for those struggling to protect the Earth's climate is the principle that everyone should have equal rights to use of the atmosphere. A very simple and workable principle with which most people will agree. This implies that countries should negotiate a ceiling on carbon-dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere. They would then agree to progressive cuts in emissions which would allow that goal to be reached, at the same time that emissions levels among rich and poor are gradually equalized. This would imply that major emitters such as the USA should drastically cut their emissions, while many Southern countries would be allowed to increase their emissions to reach the agreed per capita entitlement by a certain date. This would allow saving the atmosphere within the framework of equal use of it. Which is what the vast majority of people, North and South really want and what the atmosphere needs.

Briefing based on Ricardo Carrere's article "Carbon Colonialism", published in The Earth Crimes, July 2001