The changes necessary to change the climate change negotiations

When a house is burning down, the important thing is to put out the fire. Although the neighbours might be able to help, the fire brigade is expected to manage operations. We expect the State to provide the necessary support to put out the fire. Once it is out, experts will establish the causes of the fire and, in the event of arson, the perpetrators will be held responsible and duly punished in accordance with the law. But first the fire needs to be put out.

The results of global warming are very similar to those of a fire, but the process leading to it has been the reverse. In this case, the causes of the fire are already known (the burning of fossil fuels) and those responsible for starting it are also known (the industrialized countries). However the fire-fighters are nowhere to be seen and the government representatives are busily negotiating deals –business deals- while the flames spread with increasing speed.

The saddest part is that for years now we have known how to put the fire out: by stopping the burning of fossil fuels (oil, coal and natural gas). Although there are other factors that aggravate climate change – such as deforestation – in fact burning fossil fuels is the only source of greenhouse gases that is increasing. It is the central cause of global warming. The solution is there for all to see and all efforts should be aimed at replacing fossil fuels by other sources of energy.

The use of fossil fuels started with the Industrial Revolution and was globalized through the economic development model imposed worldwide by the industrialized countries. As a result, the total stock of greenhouse gases in the biosphere has constantly increased, resulting in climate change. It is therefore clear that these industrialized countries are mainly responsible for the present “fire” and consequently must take on the corresponding responsibility and adopt the necessary measures to halt the process.

In this respect, the first step must be for industrialized countries to introduce drastic changes to the production and use of energy at a national level, leading to the urgent replacement of fossil fuels by other sources of energy within a clearly established time frame. Such measures should include transnational corporations, imposing on them the same restrictions regarding the production and use of energy in their operations around the world as those applied in their countries of origin.

Linked to the above, those who are mainly responsible for climate change must commit themselves not to “export” the problem to other countries, as is currently the case with agrofuels, which are produced at the expense of the resources and welfare of the inhabitants of the countries of the South.

At the same time, those mainly responsible for climate change must generate the appropriate conditions – including economic and technical assistance – to enable non-industrialized countries to pursue a path of development that is free from fossil fuels. (But not through fraudulent schemes such as the Clean Development Mechanism that allow the North to continue polluting.)

More specifically, the countries responsible for climate change should provide economic compensation to those countries committing themselves not to exploit their fossil fuel deposits. Given

the debt that the North has generated to the rest of the world, because of its negative impact on the climate, this is only fair.

However, this does not imply that the other countries – the “neighbours” – cannot contribute to putting out the “fire.” This goes, to some extent, beyond North-South divisions. The present economic development model, which has been imposed all over the world, is totally reliant on the burning of fossil fuels. This implies that every country, without exception, must make the utmost effort to eradicate their use.

Of course, there is a “right to development”, as some governments of Southern countries argue. But this right cannot be exercised at the cost of the planet’s climate that belongs to everyone. This means that although such countries do not have the historic responsibility for climate change – nor the obligations this involves – they must recognize the need to adopt measures to replace fossil fuels by other alternative energies as soon as possible.

The issue of replacing fossil fuels should be the centre of the forthcoming UN climate negotiations that will take place in Copenhagen in December. Unfortunately, it is extremely unlikely that this will happen. On the contrary, it seems extremely likely that the discussions will focus on a number of absurd “solutions”. Instead of solving the problem these “solutions” will only make it worse.

Much will be said about market mechanisms for reducing emissions from deforestation, agriculture and cattle-raising. There will also be much talk about plantations as carbon sinks, about agrofuels, about carbon trade and about a recent invention known as “biochar.” But very little will be said – and as little as possible negotiated – on the central issue: the eradication of fossil fuels.

Many years have gone by since 1992 when governments committed to do something about the Earth’s climate by adopting the UN Convention on Climate Change. Since then, however, they have achieved little or nothing. At this stage, it is more than obvious that they are not willing to do much. But things could change if the “neighbourhood” –the peoples of the world– force their governments to adopt immediately measures to put out the “fire.”

Therefore we hope that the coordinated efforts of organized civil society from all over the world will directly and indirectly put pressure on government delegates in Copenhagen. We hope that they will be effective in forcing the necessary change in course. This is not a simple fire: the future of humanity is at stake. We all have the right and the duty to demand that what needs to be done is done. Now!