
Climate: Back to Basics

Since 1992, the world has had a Convention on Climate Change. The signing and ratification of this convention implies obligations, both legal and moral. Most governments have already ratified it. However, after all these years, governments have little to show except for tons of paper resulting from endless negotiations.

The 9th Conference of the Parties (COP) recently ended in Milan, again without enough signatures being found to put the 1997 Kyoto Protocol into force. After six years, the Protocol, designed to curb industrialized countries' greenhouse emissions, still awaits the signatures of the United States, the world's main polluter, and Russia.

Where does this leave us? Can nothing serious be done until these rogue states sign on? And must all campaigning efforts be centred on getting them to do so?

Surely it is time to start looking beyond and outside the Kyoto Protocol. Everyone knows that the world needs much more than this diluted treaty anyway –a treaty which would hardly cut emissions at all and which authorizes bogus "solutions" such as carbon sink tree plantations which would increase environmental problems without solving the issue of climate change itself.

We believe it is time for both civil society organizations and governments to learn the lessons of 11 years of virtual inaction and to move away from prevailing official approaches to climate change. There is a need to re-read the original Convention on Climate Change and begin to comply with it. To go back to basics to ensure that humanity has a future. The carbon-trading game must be set aside until real climate action has begun.

There remains a need for a legally-binding instrument to ensure that climate-related obligations are complied with. But many other things can be done now in all countries of the world to address climate change, while at the same time improving the livelihoods of local communities.

It must first be acknowledged that development is not synonymous with growth and that even growth is not synonymous with an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. We must all realize that the Northern development path leads to social and environmental disaster, including climate change. The South should not embrace that path, instead looking at alternative ways of achieving social welfare and environmental care. Such an approach could imply massive reductions in projected carbon emissions, currently calculated on the basis of the prevailing development paradigm.

Deforestation is not only unnecessary; it is a tragedy for forest and forest-dependent peoples. It is to the benefit of the South to conserve and restore its forests, which are currently being destroyed to serve the interests of national and transnational elites. Curbing deforestation would greatly benefit the climate –avoiding the release of the carbon stored in forests– while at the same time benefiting local communities. This can be achieved through national policies, ranging from land reform to recognition of indigenous peoples' territorial rights.

Oil, coal and gas exploitation in the tropics have resulted in widespread social and environmental impacts without bringing promised prosperity to the countries where fossil fuels are extracted. The carbon stored in hydrocarbons is the major source of greenhouse gases. A moratorium on new oil exploration would be a good first step toward avoiding climate change. If a small country like Costa Rica has been able to ban oil exploitation, other nations can, too. Clean, renewable and low-impact energy –particularly in industry and transport– would meanwhile be welcomed by millions of people living in the highly-polluted cities of the South.

The North, of course, has the obligation –and the ability– to do much more, given that its past and present material wealth has been based on abuse of the Earth's peoples and resources, including the abuse of the atmosphere that lies at the root of the climate change problem.

Among many other things, the North must use its financial, technological and scientific resources to move its own societies from a fossil fuel-dependent energy matrix to one based on clean, renewable and low-impact energy sources. The resources are there; what's needed is the political will that could be ensured through greater civil society involvement. The forces preventing this change are huge, with the oil industry at the forefront, and an equally strong opposition is needed to make things change in the necessary direction.

The above are only a few examples of the many things that could and should be done. People should begin to ask their governments why the necessary actions are not being taken. Why are we still living in 1992, when the issue was formally raised and action agreed upon? Why are governments still playing with our and our children's future? It is necessary to repeat the words of a well-known Indian religious leader, who asked government delegates during the previous Conference of the Parties held in New Delhi: "Whom do you think you are cheating? You are cheating your children; you are cheating your grandchildren."