
Those who do what governments don't

For most people, the climate change issue may seem too complicated to grasp, its solution entirely in the hands of experts and governments. However, many sectors of organized civil society are making positive contributions, often in confrontation with the very governments that have committed themselves to solve it.

Forest peoples

Many indigenous peoples and traditional forest communities are resisting activities that not only have an impact on their living conditions but also exacerbate climate change.

As noted earlier on, the main cause of climatic change is the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels, in particular oil and coal. Therefore, local struggles against oil exploitation and coal mining are helping prevent the carbon stored in hydrocarbons from being released and adding to the greenhouse effect.

Many such struggles are being fought by forest communities. Among these, those of the Ogoni in Nigeria, the U'wa in Colombia, and the Cofanes in Ecuador must be highlighted, as they have succeeded in avoiding or stopping the extraction of oil on their territories.

Deforestation is also an important contributor to climate change insofar as it allows the release of carbon stocked in forests. For this reason, all struggles to protect forests also contribute to climate stability.

Many peoples and local communities are resisting the felling of their forests by external actors (logging, mining, shrimp farming, agricultural and livestock companies). These struggles have spread across all continents where local populations are confronting a type of "development" promoted by governments resulting in the destruction of forests for the almost exclusive benefit of large companies.

Local urban communities

Much greenhouse gas is released in urban centres and from nearby industrial plants. Both industry and transport release such gases, which not only have an impact on the climate, but also on people's health.

In response, many urban communities – in the South and in the North – have organized themselves to force governments to impose control measures. In many places industry and transport have been forced to reduce their emissions substantially. In some cities, simple measures such as enabling the use of bicycles as a means of transport have also been adopted. All these struggles contribute considerably to emission reduction and therefore are a very valuable contribution to the solution of the climatic change problem.

Non-governmental organizations

As with many other issues, non-governmental organizations are playing a fundamental role, both in making the general public aware of the problem and in promoting solutions to it. Many NGOs participate in official processes, trying to get governments to adopt and implement the necessary measures to avoid global climatic change.

But there are deep divisions in the environmental movement, and some organizations are supporting some of the false solutions agreed on in the Kyoto Protocol (see previous article).

There is a growing need to follow up projects and processes starting to be implemented under the Clean Development Mechanism and carbon emissions trading schemes, with the aim of informing the public about associated problems and to support local affected communities. We would like to introduce three organizations who have taken on this work.

One of these organizations is SinksWatch, an initiative of the World Rainforest Movement. SinksWatch is hosted by the WRM's Northern Support Office and implemented by FERN. The aim of SinksWatch is to track and scrutinize carbon sequestration projects related to the Kyoto Protocol, and to highlight their threats to forests and other ecosystems, to forest peoples as well as to the climate. The focus of SinksWatch is on tree plantation sinks projects, particularly in areas where land tenure and land use rights are in dispute.

SinksWatch recognizes that there are important links between forests and climate change and advocates addressing these links in a way that honours the important role forests play in adapting to climate change and in safeguarding against the impacts of extreme weather events without justifying the continued, additional and permanent release of carbon from fossil fuel burning (email: jutta@fern.org website: <http://www.sinkswatch.org>).

A second organization is CDMWatch (focusing on the Clean Development Mechanism or CDM). CDM Watch is a small NGO based in Indonesia that helps build the capacity of civil society to understand and respond to the CDM and CDM projects. It provides analysis of the emerging CDM rules and issues relating to the CDM, and materials for use by Southern country NGOs when working on the CDM. CDM Watch has also been involved in developing North-South networks and campaigns on the CDM, with a major focus being on preventing it from becoming a new source of subsidies for unsustainable technologies like large dams and plantation-based carbon storage projects (email: cdmwatch@indosat.net.id website: <http://www.cdmwatch.org>).

The third organization is Carbon Trade Watch. Carbon Trade Watch was born in 2002 and is the newest project of the Transnational Institute. With a focus on the emerging greenhouse gas markets, Carbon Trade Watch monitors the impact of pollution trading upon environmental, social and economic justice.

The inclusion of pollution trading in the Kyoto Protocol signals an historic proliferation of the free market principle in the environmental sphere. Through research and analysis, Carbon Trade Watch seeks to challenge the assumption that a liberalised marketplace is the only arena in which environmental problems can be resolved.

Carbon Trade Watch also pools the work of others and acts as a meeting point for researchers, campaigners, cultural actors and communities opposing the negative impacts of pollution trading. The aim is to facilitate effective opposition to environmentally and socially destructive economic policy and

create space for bottom-up solutions and alternatives to emerge. Bottom-up solutions thrive on cultural diversity and cultural expression.

The Carbon Trade Watch group is organised non-hierarchically and is committed to challenging prejudice in all its forms. This is actively pursued in perspectives explored in the work, as well as being a constant part of the internal organisation of the project structure. The group believes that challenging domination is a vital part of the process of achieving a diverse spectrum of just and sustainable societies (email: info@carbontradewatch.org website: <http://www.tni.org>)

The Climate Justice movement

As with most problems facing the world today, the issue of climatic change must be addressed from the standpoint of justice. In the year 2002, a wide group of social and environmental organizations decided to organize a Climate Justice Summit, in parallel to the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change. From then on, progress was made and in the year 2002, the "Climate Justice Principles" were discussed and adopted (available at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/WSSD/Bali.html>). Their standpoint is that communities have the right to be free from climate change, its related impacts and other forms of ecological destruction; hence the aim of stopping the industrial production of greenhouse gases and associated local pollutants. Climate Justice affirms that governments are responsible for addressing climate change in a manner that is both democratically accountable to their people and in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. It demands that communities, particularly affected communities, play a leading role in national and international processes to address climate change, while it opposes the role of transnational corporations in shaping unsustainable production and consumption patterns and lifestyles, as well as their role in unduly influencing national and international decision-making.

The Climate Justice process was a leading actor during the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change held in New Delhi (India) in 2002. It organized a multitudinous demonstration, such as never seen before, against climatic change, with the participation of all the relevant social actors. As was to be expected, the demonstrators were not allowed to reach the Convention centre and barely a handful of representatives were allowed to enter the gardens of the meeting place. However, it was a clear demonstration that climatic change is not a matter for experts and government delegates, but is an issue in which people affected presently and in the future claim their right to participate in a decisive manner in the adoption of decisions which governments refuse to adopt.

The Oilwatch Network

The Oilwatch network was born inspired by the necessity to develop global strategies for communities affected by oil activities and to support the resistance processes of communities struggling against them.

Amongst the functions of the network are: the exchange of information on oil company operations in each affected country, their practices of operation and the distinctive resistance movements and international campaigns against specific companies.

Oilwatch seeks to increase environmental consciousness on a global scale, exposing the impacts of oil activity on tropical forests and on the local populations, establishing as well, links to the destruction of biodiversity, with climate change and with the widespread violation of human rights.

Since 1997 the OILWATCH network has been calling for a moratorium on new oil exploration based on two main arguments:

- the need to seriously address climate change by slowing down the main source of generation of the greenhouse effect: fossil fuels
- to avoid the social and environmental impacts of oil activities

The moratorium to new oil explorations is not only necessary: it is possible. The case of Costa Rica is clear in this respect. Its President not only declared the country free from oil activities, but even cancelled a contract with a US based company (Harken) having close links to President Bush. Costa Rica and its government have thus shown the world that it is still possible to protect local ecosystems and peoples' livelihoods while contributing to counter climate change. What a small southern country such as Costa Rica can do can obviously be also done by other more economically powerful countries ... if the political will is there (Oilwatch, e-mail: tegantai@oilwatch.org.ec)

Other emerging actors

Climate change is already occurring and its impacts are being felt all over the world. This implies an increase in the number of affected people, who have started to understand the roots of the problem and are joining the ranks of those who are already struggling. Among them, we may mention:

- those affected by hurricanes, droughts, floods and fires resulting from global climatic change
- those affected by carbon sink projects such as monoculture tree plantations planted with this objective or by major hydroelectric dams
- populations and governments of countries condemned to disappear totally or partially if measures are not adopted to counteract the greenhouse effect (in particular small island states and low-lying coastal countries)
- academic sectors committed to the environment and to people, who are able to contribute research and analysis to face the problem
- organizations and individuals working in defence of biodiversity and who understand that climatic change places at stake the survival of numerous ecosystems and the species that live therein.

In sum, existing circumstances are showing that solutions to the climatic change issue will only be possible if organized civil society – in the South and in the North, in forests, agricultural and urban areas – takes on the leading role, forcing governments to adopt all the necessary measures to change a course that is leading to global climate disaster.