
Those who did not "work it out" in The Hague

The Sixth Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Climate Change is finally over and nothing much appears to have been achieved to address global warming. This doesn't come as a surprise, given that the majority of government delegates -- with a few exceptions -- focused more on how to obtain profits for their countries and corporations from the new carbon trade than on finding true solutions to the looming climate disaster.

In fact, the conference was more like a weekend bazar than a United Nations meeting. A new generation of carbon brokers was out in force, adding their voices to more traditional "business NGOs" composed of oil corporations and other major polluters of the atmosphere. The nuclear energy lobby was also prominent in the event, trying to sell its "clean energy" as a solution to climate change.

Unfortunately, other, more respected actors, including environmental non-governmental organizations, were also laying out their wares in this marketplace, trying to sell forests and plantations as "emission cuts" or "carbon sink mechanisms". This generated some divisions among NGOs and Indigenous Peoples' Organizations, which weakened the position of those truly interested in addressing climate change. Southern governments, too, were divided on various issues, particularly the so-called Clean Development Mechanism.

The atmosphere was much more humane outside the conference centre. A demonstration organized by Friends of the Earth, for example, was a huge success. People from all over the world joined forces to pile up sandbags to form an enormous dyke in front of the conference centre. Although the dyke was originally conceived as a symbol of the rising waters which will come with global warming, it could also be perceived as a dyke to protect the world from the decisions -- of the lack thereof -- being taken inside the building.

And that was precisely the main problem: the lack of political will to begin to do what everyone knows needs to be done. Or rather, too much political will from the large corporations which dominate politics in the US, Canada, Australia, Japan and other industrialized countries, together with their armies of technocrats and tame civil servants. Thus French President Chirac's statement criticizing the trend of the negotiations was a welcome surprise. Among other things, he stated that since 1992, Parties had fallen too far behind in taking actions to combat climate change, and cautioned against further delays. Furthermore, he highlighted that the US produces a quarter of the world's emissions, and that the per capita US levels of emissions are three times higher than those of France. He called on the US to join other industrialized nations in making a successful transition to an energy-efficient economy. He said the EU had a duty to set an example by developing more economical forms of consumption and production in terms of natural resources.

The US delegates were obviously not at all happy to hear this. Nor did they like Chirac's support for an effective, equitable agreement that leaves room for future development, an independent and impartial compliance mechanism, effective cuts by Northern countries in their emissions, and assistance for the most vulnerable countries to adapt to the consequences of climate change. Noting

that each country has a duty to build structures that cut its own emissions to a minimum on a sustainable basis, Chirac emphasized that setting up projects to reduce emissions in other countries should not be seen as a means to escape domestic measures. He called for a prudent approach to using carbon sinks to alleviate climate change, and said that the ultimate aim should be the convergence of per capita emissions.

Chirac's speech, however, was but a short parenthesis punctuating closed-door dealings aimed at undermining everything he called for. Emission cuts were never truly on the table. Neither was energy efficiency or renewables. Even less so equity and justice. Corporate lobbyists did their job well and visions of short-term financial gains for a few elites clouded the brains of many Southern delegates, whose countries and peoples will suffer most from climate change. Obtaining a few dollars from prominent polluters for forest and plantation projects was the aim of many -- never mind whether such schemes were effective or not in slowing global warming. The US and Japan, meanwhile, got their money's worth from these offers of bribes in the form of support for some of their positions.

"Work it out!" was the official slogan of The Hague Conference. A simple but meaningful slogan for anyone willing to understand and do something -- but apparently meaningless to most of the government delegates present at The Hague. Future generations confronted with climate change will remember them as those who did NOT work it out.

(*) Quotations from Jacques Chirac's statement downloaded from the Earth Negotiations Bulletin