
Convention on Climate Change: The future of humanity is not tradable

The Conference of the Parties of the Framework Convention on Climate Change -preceded by a meeting of its Subsidiary Bodies in September in Lyon- will take place in The Hague in November. The obscure language used in the climate talks -and the even more obscure objectives of many governments and businesses- make it necessary to translate what's being negotiated into understandable concepts in order to facilitate very much needed public participation in the debate. As a contribution to that end, we have focused this issue of the WRM Bulletin entirely on this matter, of vital importance for the future of humanity as a whole.

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. Where do carbon dioxide emissions come from? The majority 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 are 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 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 so-called "Clean Development Mechanism" (CDM) in order to avoid compliance with even those insufficient commitments.

While the experts meet and talk about mechanisms basically aimed at avoiding compliance with emission reduction commitments, there are organizations and communities implementing real mechanisms to address the excessive use of fossil fuels. Among these, we wish to highlight the struggle of indigenous peoples opposing oil exploration and extraction in their territories. Within the context of climate change, this is the perfect example of a truly Clean Development Mechanism: the no oil option.

However, corporate interests involved in the climate negotiations and their experts are blind to realities such as these and are instead inventing clever schemes which avoid the real issues. Among the cleverest is the creation of a global "carbon market" involving the use of forests and tree plantations as carbon sinks.

Regardless of how absurd those clever schemes may be, they seem to be receiving increased support from a number of actors that have much to gain if they are approved by the upcoming Conference of the Parties.

Many governments are also supporting the carbon sink-trading initiative. For some Northern governments, it is an easy and cheap way to avoid compliance with emission cuts. For some Southern governments, it is seen as a means to earn some cash through the sale of carbon garbage dump services. However, Southern governments would have much more to win if they were to hold the North accountable to its accumulated "carbon debt", which by far exceeds the conventional debt of the South.

In sum, civil society has a crucial role to play in putting pressure on governments to induce them to change course. People need to bring some reason to a Convention on Climate Change which seems to have forgotten that its role is to ensure that future generations will inherit a livable planet. That true solutions need to be agreed upon and implemented now. That the Convention is not a market to trade carbon credits but a forum to address a very real problem. That the future of humanity is not tradable.