
Doublespeak: The language of climate negotiations

One of the consequences of climate change is the increase and aggravation of natural phenomena such as droughts, floods and storms. To make matters worse, the consequences of the current human-induced climate change are further aggravated by a number of destructive activities, among which we will focus on two: deforestation and monoculture tree plantations.

Although heavy rains are natural occurrences in the tropics, current flooding in the Malaysian state of Sarawak can be attributed to higher rainfall resulting from climate change. However, it must be stressed that the Sarawak government has for over two decades been promoting the destruction of Sarawak's forests by supporting industrial logging. In spite of the strong organized local opposition with international NGO support to oppose logging –the “Sarawak Campaign”- corporate interests prevailed and most of Sarawak's primary forests disappeared. As a result, forests ceased to play their role as rainfall regulators, soil erosion increased, river beds rose due to siltation, and the resulting floods have devastated local peoples lives and livelihoods (see details in relevant article in this bulletin).

Similarly, droughts are a natural phenomenon in Uruguay, and some put the blame for the length of the current drought on climate change. However, government forestry policies promoting the establishment of monoculture eucalyptus and pine plantations have undoubtedly played a major role in the current water crisis. Vast expanses of fast-growing tree plantations are now sucking up huge amounts of already scarce water resources, thus aggravating the drought's impacts (see more details in relevant article in this bulletin). As in the case of Sarawak, the Uruguayan government has chosen to ignore national opposition –in this case, to plantations- and has instead supported the establishment of plantations by foreign companies such as the Finnish Botnia, the US Weyerhaeuser, the Spanish Ence and Finnish-Swedish Stora Enso.

The above two examples are by no means exceptions and similar cases can be easily found in most countries facing either the impacts of deforestation or those linked to the expansion of fast wood plantations -or both.

Linking situations such as those to the international climate change negotiations, the sad conclusion is that these are being carried out in a very cynical language that can only be termed as doublespeak.

Governments unanimously agree that climate change is a fact and that it needs to be addressed, both internationally and locally. They also agree that fossil fuels and deforestation are the two major causes of climate change. They talk about mitigation, compensation and adaptation. And then their either do nothing or do the opposite of what needs to be done.

Instead of declaring fossil fuel extraction a criminal activity, they continue extracting the existing sources and exploring for new oil and gas deposits. Instead of declaring large scale deforestation illegal, they discuss complex ways of making business out of forest conservation while continuing to destroy forests. Instead of seeking to prepare their peoples for better coping with climate change

–that will impact disproportionately on the poor, on women and other disadvantaged sectors of society- they engage in activities like deforestation and tree plantations that deplete precious resources needed for future adaptation –such as water.

Seven years ago, during the Climate Change Conference held in Delhi, an Indian religious leader --Swami Agnivesh- confronted governmental doublespeak with the plain truth: "Whom do you think you are cheating? You are cheating your children; you are cheating your grandchildren."

Those words remain today as true as they were then.