
Reasonable proposals to the Convention on Climate Change

Everyone now seems to agree that the Earth's climate is changing as a direct result of human activities and that the social, environmental, political and economic consequences will be catastrophic if nothing is done – and fast – to address the problem.

The 12th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Climate Change will be meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, from 6 to 17 November. Unfortunately, this Convention has until now shown that human greed has prevailed over human intelligence, and has been dominated by interests that care too little about the environment and people and too much about money.

It is therefore necessary to think in terms of what really needs to be done to avoid the looming climatic crisis and not about how much money there is to win or lose in different scenarios.

It is a well known fact that the main causes of climate change are related to fossil fuel consumption (coal, oil and gas) and to a lesser extent to deforestation, and that both result in the carbon emissions mainly responsible for global warming.

Those two causes are, however, totally different. The carbon stored in fossil fuels is not part of the biospheric carbon cycle. Once extracted and burnt, that carbon adds to the above-ground carbon pool and will not return back to its original underground form of oil, coal or gas for eons. Fossil fuel use is therefore, practically speaking, an irreversible cause of climate change.

This is why fossil fuel use should by now be considered an extreme environmental provocation which cannot be “compensated for” in any way. If governments had taken this approach when the Kyoto Protocol was agreed upon in 1997, we could now be moving toward a fossil fuel-free world, with a much brighter climatic future.

Carbon emissions resulting from deforestation are different, because the carbon stored in forest biomass is – and has always been – part of the above ground carbon pool. This means that if deforestation is reversed through forest restoration –which is not synonymous to monoculture tree plantations – the growing forests are likely to “suck up” some of the carbon released when the forest was destroyed or degraded.

In view of the above, if governments are serious about tackling climate change, they must commit themselves to:

- phasing out fossil fuels in a very short time
- halting and reversing deforestation in a very short time

However, not all countries are equally responsible for climate change. The industrialized North holds most of the responsibility for the problem, and is obliged to implement solutions to the problem it created. As most experts agree, it also has the financial and technical resources to make the phase out of fossil fuels possible.

The North's responsibility is very clear in the case of fossil fuel-related carbon emissions, most of which they have released into the atmosphere since the start of the Industrial Revolution. But it is equally clear that most of the deforestation that is taking place in the South is also related to the North. Production of soya beans, meat, shrimp, palm oil, timber, pulp and paper, minerals – all of which result in forest loss – end up mostly in Northern markets, while Northern-led institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank impose policies on the South that necessarily result in further deforestation.

It is therefore necessary that Northern governments commit themselves to:

- making available any financial and technical resources required to phase out fossil fuels in a very short time – in both North and South
- introducing relevant changes to their economies and policies to make it possible to stop and reverse deforestation in a very short time
- ensuring that Southern countries and peoples benefit from and are in no way negatively impacted by those changes. Among other things, this means that no large-scale tree or biofuel monocultures are implemented on their lands

Accordingly, the Convention needs to move away from the complicated and fraudulent carbon trading schemes it has been involved in during the past nine years. As a sign of change, it should cease to consider the use of tree plantations as carbon sinks and immediately exclude the possibility of using genetically modified trees in such plantations. At the same time, it should begin to address seriously the issues of how to phase out fossil fuels and how to stop deforestation.

All this is nothing more than common sense – even though it is a far cry from the false solutions government climate negotiators will probably spend most of their time discussing when they meet in Nairobi.

Of course, many vested interests oppose common sense. But the main vested interest that should be taken into account is humanity as a whole, whose future depends on what is done – or not – by the governments involved in this process.