The Climate Change Convention: From hope to betrayal

The Earth Summit, a melting pot for awareness and hope

The first United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), or Earth Summit, was a milestone in arousing world environmental awareness. Despite a lot of disagreement about the links between environment and development, many national leaders did express concern about the way the prevailing development model damaged the environment and generated and increased poverty. At long last, 20 years after the First Earth Summit in 1972, environment had come to the fore, creating great expectations for the changes governments promised to make.

Among other commitments, it was agreed to establish a legally binding convention aimed at preventing global climate change: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

The text of the Convention was adopted on 9 May 1992 and entered into force on 21 March 1994, with 166 signatory states. Those states that have not signed the Convention may accede to it at any time.

The Convention recognizes the accelerated change in the planet's climate over the past 200 years and the serious adverse effects this implies. It also admits that the origin of this change is the increase in concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, causing a warming of the Earth's surface and the atmosphere. It also points out that most of these emissions come from industrialized countries.

The ultimate objective of the Convention is that the concentrations in the atmosphere of greenhouse gases resulting from human activities should become stable at a level not involving any risk to the climatic system.

The Kyoto Protocol, when betrayal was born

The Third Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention held in Kyoto, Japan adopted on 11 December 1997 the text of the Convention's Protocol. So far, it has been ratified by 62 countries and States may continue accessing it at any time. It will enter into force when it fulfils the dual condition of having been ratified by 55 countries and that among these, there is a sufficient number of industrialized countries responsible for 55% of the 1990 total emission of CO2, as a minimum.

Although the minimum number of signatory countries has already been exceeded, the second prerequisite has not been met, insofar as some countries that are great emitters of CO2, such as the United States, have not ratified the Protocol.

In addition, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – the official body responsible for

advising the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) – has stated that in order to avoid dangerous changes to the climate systems, it will be necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60% by the end of the century from 1990 levels. The Kyoto Protocol only foresees a reduction of 5.2% by the most polluting countries, but is not on course to achieve even that.

Article 12 of the Protocol includes what is called a “Clean Development Mechanism.” Allegedly, this is to try to help achieve sustainable development, but in fact – and it is even declared as such– it is an “aid” to enable industrialized countries to fulfil their commitments to reduce emissions as established in the Protocol. This Article allows afforestation, reforestation and avoided deforestation from 1990, to be swapped for emissions. The mechanism also accepts large hydropower projects as “clean development” despite their notorious adverse impacts on forests (and the associated releases of CO2) and traditional communities, who have often been displaced from their original forestlands.

The lengthy process of successive Conferences of the Parties (COPs) in which influential countries such as the United States, which is responsible for 25% of the world total of greenhouse gas emissions, have refused to comply with the commitments agreed on in Kyoto in 1997, has led observers to think that the Protocol may well be wrecked. In this context, Japan – another of the major contaminators – put pressure on COP 8 (2002), to reach an agreement that would “save” the Protocol (but not the planet), by allowing plantations to be described as “carbon sinks”. With this final coup, the expectation of reaching real solutions was betrayed. For its part, the United States continues to refuse to ratify the Protocol. President Bush has clearly stated that it would damage the country’s economy and its energy policy, which come first– that is to say, above the interests of all humanity and the long term interests of his country-people.

Licensed to contaminate

Carbon emissions, which at the start were considered as an imminent danger, became a commodity. Commercial approaches started predominating and climate action began to be considered mainly in accounting and speculative terms. A carbon market was promoted by fossil-fuel producing and consuming industries, many officials in the US and some other Northern governments, and a wide range of vested interests. The assumption was that any carbon-dioxide emissions are acceptable as long as they can be “offset” by some other activity that absorbs the CO2 --like planting trees, which, through photosynthesis, convert CO2 into wood carbon-- or has a reduced level of emissions.

Fossil-fuel users buy permission to go on dumping by investing in activities which, while contributing still more fossil carbon flows into the dumps, are claimed to produce smaller flows than would “otherwise” be the case. Alternative futures which would use even less carbon are dismissed as impossible. Industrialized countries can thus continue with their emissions, greenwashing their image through payments to poor countries that end up “selling” their environment. Though harassed by poverty, many are under pressure to set up plantations to act as carbon sinks. The same commercial standpoint prevails: forests are no longer vital ecosystems but timber for industry, cellulose, chips and now, sinks with a market value.

For accounting purposes the conservation of a forest cannot be considered as a measure to mitigate global warming. But the idea that forests should be treated as a measure to avoid the problem becoming worse, continues to be ignored. Including forest conservation into a market mechanism surely wouldn’t have been a good choice but ignoring the need for funding and political will to maintain and restore forests – not least as a measure to avoid dangerous climate change – is a missed opportunity we may pay for dearly. In the convoluted logic of climate negotiators, it is better to

log a primary forest and replace it with a plantation of fast growing trees, which allegedly absorb more carbon (they often don't)! The notion that when vegetation is growing, sequestration of carbon is greater than carbon released, was allowed to eclipse the fact that native forests maintain large stores of carbon, in normal circumstances keeping a rough balance over time between carbon released and absorbed.

The idea was to continue with the same rate of consumption, without reducing emissions, and to allow and promote plantations on the argument that temporary or uncertain sequestration, even for a few years, has a positive effect. A profitable deal for a few, but what follows? If plantations are logged, they again release CO2 and we are back almost at the start. The alternative would be to continue planting indefinitely until the trees – perhaps of a single convenient species, such as eucalyptus?– cover the face of the Earth. In that case millions of hectares of carbon dumps would cover areas needed to provide local populations with food and livelihood. Does this sound ecological?

Carbon sinks under the Kyoto Protocol, in other words, are bad news for the planet and for its inhabitants. They do not reverse or halt climate change and it is highly questionable whether they can be considered palliative measures in a transitional stage towards other, non-contaminating energies. Thirteen years have gone by since the first announcements and signs of structural change toward alternative energy sources are few and far between. On the contrary, unsustainable extraction of fossil fuels continues.

From culprits to saviours

In all the official proceedings on climate, a fundamental and hidden actor – recently not so hidden – is the corporate business community related to energy, and in particular, the oil companies.

With their highly contaminating activities and expansion policy within a development model sustained on fossil fuels, these companies are among those most responsible for CO2 emissions, and therefore for climate change. In spite of this, they are not yet bound by any international agreement to reduce their emissions, are accountable to few and are very hard to regulate, precisely due to their leverage.

Some of the most powerful companies involved are: Exxon/Mobil (United States), Shell (Netherlands/United Kingdom), BP/Amoco (United Kingdom), Totalfinaelf (France- Belgium), Chevron/Texaco (United States), Repsol/YPF (Spain/Argentina), ENI/AGIP (Italy), OXY (United States). Yet today, these same companies are submitting technological proposals – mainly based on the extensive use of space and resources – to save the world from a catastrophe, thus provoking new impacts and environmental imbalance. Some examples are plantations of major transnational companies that are transforming ecosystems and displacing traditional peoples, or schemes for gigantic solar panels or wind parks on agricultural lands, for dams flooding large areas with the associated reservoirs generating carbon and methane emissions, or immense pipelines crossing protected areas or populated zones, placing at risk local populations.

Is there a way out?

"Carbon-offsets" such as large-scale tree monocultures are not solutions. Among many other wrongs, they worsen the loss of biodiversity, which, as a group of scientists from the Imperial College Population Biology Centre at Silwood Park, United Kingdom, in an article published in Nature, has recognized "may reduce the ability of terrestrial ecosystems to absorb anthropogenic CO2."

The real solution is the conservation of energy, the reduction of consumption, a more equitable use of resources and equitable development and distribution of clean and renewable low impact energy sources. Yet, while it is almost a platitude to say so, the political will of governments will be necessary. This is scarce, and when it does exist, it must face very powerful and implacable interests.

In fact, the only tool left to achieve the urgent and critical changes and avoid the catastrophes that have been announced, is the participation of civil society demanding that the commitments already taken on be fulfilled, and questioning the commercial criteria predominating at corporate and governmental level. The prevailing approaches are criminal and, in the long run, suicidal.

Article based on information from: “The Carbon Shop: Planting New Problems”, Larry Lohmann, http://www.wrm.org.uy/plantations/material/carbon.html ; “Climate and Equity: After Kyoto”, Compiled by Aubrey Meyer and Nicholas Hildyard, http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/03climate.html ; “Climate Change Overview - Vital Climate Graphics”, http://www.climateark.org/vital/01.htm