
Climate Change: The lesson from Lyon

Government delegates from all over the world met this month in Lyon, France, in a Preparatory Conference prior to the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Climate Change which will be held next November in the Hague, Netherlands.

The only positive thing that can be said about the Lyon meeting is that delegates worked very hard, late into the evenings, and that some delegates -- unfortunately too few -- actually tried to do something about climate change. But the general character of the meeting was one of blackmailing, arm-twisting, marketing, bribing and trading among the various elites present. Most of the time was spent discussing money for programmes which actually have little or no relevance to climate.

One of the topics talked about was something called the "Clean Development Mechanism." This is a scheme which could (among other things) allow industrialized countries to "compensate for" their emissions through the use of biospheric "carbon sinks" in the South -- such as tree plantations, forests and changes in land use -- thus enabling them to maintain and even increase the fossil fuel emissions that are at the root of climate change. Little attention was paid by most of the diplomats and technocrats present to the proven negative impacts that forestry projects similar to those contemplated have already had on people and the environment.

Fortunately, this false climate "solution" has not yet been approved by the Conference of the Parties. But the preliminary negotiations at Lyon gave little reason for optimism. Some of the delegations present focused on blackmailing ("We won't sign the Kyoto Protocol unless lots of carbon sinks are included"), accompanied by arm-twisting ("You are free not to agree, but . . ."). The US and Japan scored very high here. Others tried to trade their countries' "carbon sink" capacity for money. Some Latin American delegates had a very high profile in this respect. A third group --including many European delegates -- tried to show commitment to Kyoto-agreed emission cuts, but left the door open for forestry projects in the Hague agreement. The small group of countries who strongly oppose the inclusion of carbon sinks in the Kyoto Protocol seemingly could do little more than try to find ways of avoiding the very worst of the possible deals on offer.

Sadly enough, those were the meeting's highlights. There was almost no discussion of the real issues: equal rights to the atmosphere, fossil fuel use reductions, especially in the North, alternative energy sources, and energy efficiency and conservation. If governments had been truly willing to address climate change, they would have focused on how to achieve drastic cuts in fossil fuel emissions through the active promotion of clean, renewable and low impact sources of energy. North and South would have begun to share the research and experience that both have regarding low-impact energy use and would have considered mechanisms to ensure the effective exchange of the relevant knowledge, technology, and political experience both from South to North and from North to South. Those should have been the core issues in discussions regarding any "Clean Development Mechanism." But the governments present chose otherwise.

One lesson can be drawn from the Lyon meeting: unless people put pressure on their governments, climate negotiators will do nothing to head off the world's looming climate disaster. Peoples'

movements must have the courage to disbelieve what most technocrats in governments, research institutions and even NGOs are telling them -- namely, that climate change is an issue for "experts" only. They must understand that this is not a technical but a power issue and that the arena is political, where everyone is entitled to participate. They must keep firmly in mind that the issue is essentially very simple with an equally simple solution that anyone can understand: replace fossil fuels by alternative and environmentally-friendly energy sources. Climate change will not be solved by planting millions of hectares of pines and eucalyptus, which will only add to existing problems.

If left alone, official delegates will lead us all to disaster. They must be pushed, both from outside and from inside their grand meeting halls, toward more sober and responsible action. That is the lesson from Lyon.