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THE FOCUS OF THIS ISSUE: Climate Change in Cancún

The 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change begins on the 29th of this month in Cancún, Mexico. With this edition of our bulletin, WRM joins in the efforts of social and environmental organizations around the world to use this meeting to exert pressure on governments to address the root of the problem: the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels.

Since the meeting's agenda does not focus on this issue, but instead places priority on false market-based "solutions" – and in particular the attempt to include forests and plantations in the lucrative global carbon market – it will be up to social movements to make Cancún a forum to voice their opposition, strengthen networks of resistance, and develop popular alternatives to prevent the imminent climate disaster.

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OUR VIEWPOINT

Open letter to the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change

In view of the upcoming meeting in Cancún of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, WRM is circulating an open letter addressed to the government delegations attending the meeting. It is aimed not only at denouncing the criminal inaction of governments, but also – and more importantly – at encouraging people to exert greater pressure on governments

to force them to adopt the necessary measures to prevent the imminent climate disaster. The letter says:

Conference of the Parties
Framework Convention on Climate Change
Distinguished government representatives:

As you well know, climate change is happening and its consequences are already being suffered by millions of people around the world – especially the most vulnerable- and there is every indication that the problem is growing worse. The causes of global warming are perfectly well known, as are the measures needed to stop it from becoming more acute and eventually affecting humankind as a whole. Nevertheless, you know as well as we know that the governments you represent continue refusing to do what they have an obligation to do in order to seriously confront the problem.

It is worth recalling that in 1992, all of the world's governments pledged their commitment, through an international agreement, to adopt measures to prevent a climate disaster. This is what gave rise to the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which almost all of the world's governments have signed and ratified. Since then, 18 years have passed in which governments have done little or nothing to confront the problem. In other words, for almost two decades, they have been violating the spirit of the Convention, which was aimed at preventing climate change from taking place. Given the potential consequences for the survival of humankind, such a violation could be classified as a crime against humanity.

Of course, we are fully aware that governments do not act alone, and that operating under their jurisdictions there are large companies – state-owned and private – that profit from the exploitation and sale of fossil fuels, which we all know to be the main cause of climate change. We are also aware of the power that these companies wield over many of the governments you represent. However, this does not absolve your governments of their responsibility – assumed by signing this Convention – to protect this common good of all humankind, the global climate.

For the sixteenth time, you will be participating in a meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change. The last several meetings have not moved beyond negotiating over secondary issues – with very little success – and have failed to tackle the crux of the problem: the need for the total elimination of fossil fuel emissions in the shortest time possible. There is every indication that the next meeting in Cancún will follow in these same footsteps.

Nevertheless, the world still has hope that governments will adopt the decisions needed to prevent a climate disaster, and it is prepared to support them. In order for this hope to inspire this support, what is needed are clear signs of a complete change of attitude. In this regard, the main sign would be placing fossil fuels at the centre of the debate. The time has come to put aside discussion of false solutions that have been so eagerly espoused (“carbon sinks”, “avoided deforestation-REDD”, the “Clean Development Mechanism”, “carbon offsets”, etc.) to focus on the real problem: how to move beyond the fossil fuel era as quickly as possible.

As a first step towards restoring their lost credibility, your governments should begin by committing themselves in Cancún to an immediate and permanent halt on the search for new fossil fuel reserves in their territories. At the same time, they should channel their efforts towards finding mechanisms of compensation to ensure that reserves already identified but not yet exploited remain untouched. Finally, they should set concrete deadlines for the total eradication of fossil fuels.

We realize that this is an enormous challenge, but is it really too much to ask, when what is at stake is nothing less than the survival of life on earth?

World Rainforest Movement
November 2010

THE CLIMATE HEATS UP FOR CANCUN

From climate change to climate disaster: A thin oil line

Climate change as a process of modifications in the complex system of atmospheric phenomena (temperature, humidity, pressure, winds and precipitation) is nothing new for our planet. It has taken place over vast periods of time, as a consequence of volcanic eruptions and changes in solar radiation, atmospheric composition, the movement of continents, ocean currents and the earth's orbit.

In the past there have also been episodes of sudden climate change, as was the case 55 million years ago, when temperatures rose by around 6°C, possibly as a result of extreme volcanic activity superimposed on a peak in a gradual global warming trend. Millions of tons of carbon were released into the ocean and atmosphere, leading to the extinction of many species on the deep sea floor. Similar sudden events took place around 120 and 183 million years ago. In all of these episodes, it took some 100,000 years for the earth's climate to recover.

During the last glacial stage (110,000-11,500 years ago), the temperature alternately warmed and cooled several times by more than 10°C, provoking major climate changes throughout the Northern hemisphere. Each warming and cooling episode took a few decades to develop but lasted for hundreds of years. (1)

The variation introduced in the last 200 years, following the Industrial Revolution, is that the concentration of gases that cause the greenhouse effect – and which in the right proportions have made life on earth possible by retaining the heat emitted from the earth's surface – abruptly rose as a result of the excessive burning of fossil fuels (oil, gas, coal) through human activity. This led to a rise in atmospheric temperature and the resulting acceleration of climate change, reflected in alterations in the climate, which now follows a non-linear pattern with unexpected and drastic weather events when greenhouse gas levels reach a critical point that unleashes other previously unknown processes. This has placed the planet in a state of emergency that threatens life on earth as we know it.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a group of scientific experts

on climate change established by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), has estimated that in order to prevent a critical rise in global temperature, emissions from the burning of oil and other fossil fuels must be reduced by between 80% and 95% by 2050.

But emission levels have not merely remained at the same levels, they have actually increased! The Arctic polar ice cap has reached the lowest level ever recorded, while the melting of the layer of permanently frozen subsoil (permafrost) in Siberia is releasing vast deposits of methane (one of the greenhouse gases), further exacerbating global warming. In the meantime, 40% of the carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions produced by human activities, which have abruptly increased in the last two centuries, have been absorbed by the oceans, resulting in their acidification. This process could be even further aggravated, with disastrous consequences for marine life.

The latest studies reveal that the average global temperature will continue to rise, but the degree and duration of this increase in temperature, as well as the severity of its consequences, will depend on how quickly and effectively greenhouse gas emissions are reduced.

According to figures from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), one fifth of the world's vertebrate species are threatened with extinction. While this is the result of numerous causes, one of them is the rise in global temperature.

In the meantime, 43 small island states in the Pacific, Mediterranean, Indian Ocean and Caribbean, with a combined population of 41 million people, could become submerged due to a rise in sea level.

The roots of the climate disaster

In April of this year, more than 35,000 people gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia for the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. The conference served as a forum to explore new viewpoints and proposals for saving the planet, and above all, to directly address the causes of the climate crisis. The final conclusions of the Conference underlined: "We confront the terminal crisis of a civilizing model that is patriarchal and based on the submission and destruction of human beings and nature that accelerated since the industrial revolution." (2)

The responsibility for this state of affairs lies with the so-called "developed" countries, who are called on to remedy the situation by "altering their patterns of life and development, immediately cancelling external debt, stopping the production of armaments, shifting from fossil energy to renewable energy, and changing the international financial, economic and social systems that perpetuate these patterns."(3)

The current system of globalized markets has been imposed by any means possible, including violence. And very little is said about the contribution of wars to climate change: from massive deforestation, as in the case of Vietnam during the long war of occupation by U.S. troops, to the consumption of fuel required for the mobilization of the whole military apparatus.

According to 2006 estimates from the CIA itself, only 35 countries (out of a total of 210 in the world) consume more oil per day than the Pentagon. Steve Kretzmann, director of Oil Change International, states that the Iraq war emits more carbon dioxide than 60% of all countries. (4) But the armed forces are not subject to any restrictions on emissions, and the Copenhagen agreement does not even mention the subject.

Consequences: climate debt, migration, fraud

The climate debt

The Industrial Revolution was the launch pad for the current system of intensive large-scale production, globalized commerce and excessive consumption – and, as a corollary, the quantum leap in greenhouse gas emissions. In both cases, the processes have a first name and a last name, so to speak. The exploitation and consumption of fossil fuels, forests, agricultural land and other resources – usually located in countries of the South and frequently seized through force – allowed the industrialized countries to achieve the economic power they hold today.

The historical environmental debt of the countries of the North, generated through the occupation of territories and cheap appropriation and destruction of the natural assets of the South, shifted to the climate through carbon dioxide emissions and the occupation of the atmospheric space, giving rise to the climate debt.

Professor Stephen Pacala of Princeton University, cited in an article by Barry Saxifrage, (5) calculated the emissions per person for the 6.5 billion people on the planet, and reached the conclusion that the poorest 3 million people emit essentially nothing. (6) The differences between countries is also astounding. Here are just a few examples of annual emissions per person in tons of carbon: Zimbabwe, 0.93; United States, 19.66; Canada, 17.86; China, 3.7. In other words, people in Canada or the United States emit approximately 20 times more carbon per capita than the average person in a country of the South like Zimbabwe.

Worldwide, the richest 8% are responsible for 50% of total emissions and the richest 15% are responsible for 75%. The remaining 85% of humanity emits only 25% of the total.

These figures lead to interesting considerations regarding measures to confront climate change: those who should significantly reduce emissions are the richest 15%, and most of the reductions should come from the richest 8%. And that is simply because they are the ones using almost all of the fossil fuels.

But the trend is not moving in this direction. While Todd Stern, the lead US negotiator at the climate talks in Copenhagen, acknowledged his country's role in the current concentration of emissions, he hastened to add that he categorically rejected any sense of guilt or reparations. At the very time when they should accept their responsibility and take action to confront the social, environmental and planetary crisis! (7) This unwillingness was fully demonstrated in 2009 at the failed Copenhagen climate conference, and reflected in the pitiful "agreement" that the industrialized countries drew up, requiring of themselves not zero emissions, but

rather zero commitment to reducing them.

Up until now, throughout the long process of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, all that has emerged are distractions – in the best of cases – and false solutions that fully diverge from the only viable course of action: changing the current patterns of production, trade and consumption, which are controlled by corporate interests and demand excessive consumption of fossil fuels while fostering inequality and injustice. Change the system, not the climate.

Migration

Climate change is also aggravating the migration crisis, the worst in history, reflected by the 214 million displaced people in the world today. (8) Droughts, floods caused by storms and hurricanes, water contamination, soil erosion and degradation and other destructive impacts of the current environmental disaster combine with other factors that are forcing people to migrate due to a lack of access to arable land or water resources. An estimated 50 million people have been forced to migrate by the effects of climate change.

The thousands of people pushed out of rural areas often end up forming part of the poverty belts around large cities. Others emigrate to the countries of the North in a desperate search for survival, but often come up against tight border controls in a world where borders are open to capital but not to the people displaced as a result. Many of those who make it past these controls end up living as second-class citizens, uprooted from their own cultures in countries where the conspicuous consumption and ostentation of the first-class citizens often exacerbates social problems.

The migration crisis, climate crisis and social crisis are merely different facets of the same problem.

Fraud

Amazingly, the climate crisis, in which nothing less than the survival of humanity is at stake, has been turned into a business opportunity by insatiable corporate greed. A huge amount of capital moves through the global carbon markets, providing fertile ground for environmental crimes.

An article by Mark Schapiro (9) reports on a conference organized by Interpol, whose mandate is set to expand into a completely new area: fraud in the global carbon markets. These complex markets, which operate in countries subject to emissions restrictions under the Kyoto Protocol and involve numerous new instruments, have grown exponentially in the last five years. Transactions on these markets have already reached 300 billion dollars, an enormous sum that will naturally attract criminal interest. Operating with ambiguous oversight, the carbon markets offer significant new opportunities for fraud. Carbon is transformed into a commodity that can be traded.

The growing interest in using the conservation of tropical forests as “offsets” for the carbon emissions of companies and governments elsewhere creates considerable

opportunities for fraud in countries where land ownership is disputed.

This is not just idle speculation. The overseas anti-corruption unit of the City of London police force is investigating allegations that Carbon Harvesting Company, which operates in the carbon offset sector, may have improperly claimed access to forests in Liberia in order to sell the carbon rights to European and other companies. In other cases, carbon traders have generated millions in illicit profits through tax evasion: in Denmark, for example, it was revealed that more than 80% of carbon trading houses were merely fronts for tax fraud. Even the environmental minister of the United Kingdom, Lord Chris Smith, acknowledged that as the price of carbon increases, the more lucrative the market will become, and the more criminals will be attracted to it.

The crisis as an opportunity – for business?

So-called “Capitalism 2.0”, the new version of liberal capitalism resurrected to navigate financial quicksands, has turned its sights on exploiting the climate crisis in this new phase of capitalist accumulation. None other than the chairman of Shell UK declared that for business, tackling climate change is both a necessity and an opportunity.

The Kyoto Protocol provided the form and content, giving rise to the device of strategies like the cap and trade system (the setting of maximum limits for emissions and trading of unused emissions credits) and the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). The World Bank, among others, eagerly joined in, promoting the idea of turning a tragedy (carbon emissions) into a commodity and creating a market where it can be traded, on the premise that money can right any wrong.

But the carbon market and carbon emissions trading, controlled by the same economic system that is the root cause of the climate crisis, has merely succeeded in maintaining the hegemony of capital. The prospects of continuing along this road, therefore, are not very encouraging for the climate.

“Solutions” that are part of the problem

- *CDM: neither clean nor development*

We live in a time when it is crucial to realize that the climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies developed under the Framework Convention on Climate Change and Kyoto Protocol and grounded in market principles have not succeeded in reverting climate change. The fact that CO₂ emissions have continued rising, along with global average temperatures, is conclusive proof of this. (10) What these strategies have succeeded in doing, instead, is creating lucrative business opportunities for investment in countries of the South and creating a financial speculation system that has given rise to numerous instances of corruption.

In Africa, a vast continent coveted for its enormous land mass and wealth of natural resources, Blessing Karumbidza and Wally Menne undertook a case study (11) of the village of Idete, located in the Mufindi district of Iringa province in southern Tanzania. There, in the framework of a supposed “clean development” (low carbon

emissions) project, Green Resources Ltd. of Norway has established monoculture plantations of exotic (non-native) eucalyptus and pine trees in the moist grassland of the southern area of Mufindi.

The argument used is that tree plantations make a positive contribution to fighting climate change because they act as “carbon sinks”, leading to carbon emissions “savings”. The resulting certified emissions reductions (CERs) or “carbon credits” can be purchased on the carbon market by industries or governments in the North to offset part of their emissions reduction obligations. This is how the so-called “Clean Development Mechanism” works, based on the fallacy that additional carbon extracted from underground (as fossil fuels) can be effectively offset with atmospheric carbon that is constantly recycled to maintain a stable balance.

Green Resources Ltd. hopes that the monoculture tree plantations it has established on valuable grasslands will be accepted as a CDM project and generate CERs that it can sell to the Norwegian government. No consideration is given to the negative impacts of tree plantations on the soil of the grasslands, water reserves and local rural communities. Nor is it taken into account that grasslands store significant stocks of carbon over hundreds of thousands and years, and under the right conditions, those stocks can continue to grow.

The Green Resources subsidiary in Tanzania cheaply acquired 14,000 hectares of land from the community of Idete, and has already planted 2,600 hectares. It plans to continue buying more land: no less than 170,000 hectares in Tanzania alone, where it is granted 99-year leases to land in a country with a primarily rural economy, which means that possession of, access to and control of land is essential for survival. The company’s captive clients are communities that are usually poor and lack the sophistication to deal with these kinds of international business deals, and a government willing to exchange natural resources for foreign investment. It is not difficult to imagine the situation and the results. For the government of Norway, a major oil producer and exporter, this Norwegian company project will provide carbon credits that it can buy and then claim that it has “offset” domestic emissions. There is little left for local communities, and even less in a few years, when the plantations start to exhaust their water reserves. This is how “carbon colonialism” works.

It is simply unacceptable that funds supposedly aimed at solving climate problems are channelled to large-scale monoculture tree plantation projects, which not only make no real contribution to tackling the climate crisis, but also make local communities more vulnerable to poverty and undermine their food sovereignty.

- *biochar: underground monoculture tree plantations?*

Another of the “solutions” devised as a strategy for “climate change mitigation” – anything except considering how to dismantle the oil-dependent model – is something known as biochar. Biochar is produced by burning agricultural “waste” or crops and wood from trees planted for this purpose through pyrolysis, the thermochemical decomposition of organic material at high temperatures in the absence of oxygen. The resulting charcoal is combined with fertilizers – produced with fossil fuels – and added to the soil, where the carbon it contains is supposed to remain “sequestered”. The premise is that biochar also regenerates degraded soils.

In addition, its promoters claim that the process generates energy that could be utilized to replace some uses of fossil fuels.

This is another sector where there is talk of major investment opportunities, aimed at large-scale production. There are already biochar projects underway in numerous African countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. (12)

Advocates of biochar are promoting targets that would require the use of 500 million hectares of land or more to produce charcoal plus energy, and much of that land would undoubtedly be devoted to vast expanses of monoculture tree plantations created for this purpose. (13) This represents a serious threat to many local communities, including indigenous communities, who would be displaced from their lands and lose access to critical means of survival. There is also a risk that these threats could be worsened by the development of genetically modified (GM) tree varieties specifically geared to biochar production, or the expansion of the number of fast-growing tree species.

To date there have been no studies on the long-term effects of biochar on soil stability, or on what it would mean for biodiversity if every last plant is seized to be burned and buried, thereby robbing the soil of nutrients and organic material that would normally produce humus. It would also alter natural ecosystems that play an essential role in stabilizing and regulating the climate and are crucial for food production and the protection of water resources. And it is not yet known whether charcoal in soil actually represents a "carbon sink" at all.

UNEP has stressed that the long-term impacts of biochar on agricultural sustainability and biodiversity are still unknown, and advises treating biochar projects with great caution.(14) This has not stopped the biochar lobby – represented by the International Biochar Initiative and made up largely of companies and academics with related commercial interests – from promoting biochar and pushing for its inclusion in international carbon trading mechanisms.

Everything revolves around carbon content, with sights set on the carbon market.

- *biomass: a sales strategy*

If it weren't so tragic, it would be laughable: as humanity faces a climate emergency, we watch as the same economic powers that forged the oil-dependent industrial system that put us in this situation are now coming forward to promote certain changes that will allow everything to continue business as usual. This includes the same level of private transportation, the same flow of cargo ships and planes to keep moving merchandise around globalized markets, the same frenetic pace of industrial production, the same expansion of industrial agriculture. Everything remains exactly the same, and in the same hands, but with a "bio" touch.

Take for instance the proposals to replace fossil fuel with fuel produced from biomass. Could it be possible?

Jim Thomas of the ETC Group provides a list of products and services currently being produced with fossil fuels: (15)

* Transport fuels (for cars, trucks, planes): close to 70% of petroleum currently ends up as liquid fuels for transport and heating.

*Electricity: coal, natural gas and petroleum are currently responsible for 67% of global electricity production.

*Chemicals and plastics: approximately 10% of global petroleum reserves are converted into plastics and petrochemicals.

*Fertilizers: Global fertilizer production requires intensive use of natural gas.

There are numerous formulas for going “bio” through the use of biomass: ethanol and biodiesel can be used as liquid transport fuels; for electricity production, biomass is being co-fired with coal, while research is underway into using nano cellulose and synthetic bacteria to make electric current from living cells; sugar is being considered for use in the production of bioplastics and chemicals; and biochar is being promoted as a substitute for fertilizers that could be produced on an industrial scale.

As Thomas rightly points out, plants have been a source of fuel and material production for millennia, but the new use of the term “biomass” marks a specific shift in humanity’s relationship with plants. The taxonomic world of different species and varieties opened up by the word “plants” is lost, and instead, all organic matter is viewed from an industrial perspective as the same undifferentiated “stuff”: biomass.

In the world of bio-commerce, ecosystems, plants and organic materials are reduced to their common denominators, to raw materials: grasslands and forests become sources of cellulose or carbon. And from this perspective, forests and monoculture tree plantations are the same thing, just as they are viewed as the same thing by those who look at them as sources of wood or carbon.

In the meantime, fertile land now acquires extra value as a potential source of biomass. This is already accelerating a land grab focused primarily on countries of the South, and especially Africa. The technologies of biomass transformation – nanotechnology, biotechnology and synthetic biology – are the tools that will make it possible to extract this new raw material.

A whole melting pot of corporate mergers and makeovers is sweeping the chemical, biotech, forestry and agribusiness sectors to prepare for this “change”: the plundering of a new raw material for fuel production, and nothing more. This will guarantee the perpetuation of the same balance of power and system of capitalist accumulation, with its flipside of inequality, poverty and exclusion. The patterns of production, marketing and consumption that are the root causes of the climate crisis will remain fully intact.

In the case of agrofuels, those being most heavily promoted are “biodiesel” (produced from oleaginous plants) and ethanol (produced through the fermentation of plant cellulose). Since there is no thought of lowering the level of demand, this will

mean a massive expansion of monoculture plantations of crops specifically grown for this purpose, such as soybeans, corn, oil palm, sugar cane, jatropha and eucalyptus, among others.

In 2006, as part of its commitment to reduce carbon emissions, the European Union set a target for 10% of transport fuel to be from agricultural sources by 2020. The consequences of turning up to 69,000 km² (6,900,000 hectares) of land over to vast plantations of agrofuel crops, as has been forecast, are cause for major concern.

(16) Family and small-scale agriculture, as well as forests, grasslands, wetlands and other diverse ecosystems, would be wiped away under the advance of expansion of agrofuels.

In any event, this will not entail a radical change in the worldwide energy mix.

Exploration continues in search of new reserves of fossil fuels, existing reserves of coal, oil and gas are still being exploited, and there are no signs that this is going to change.

- *REDD*

A new false solution has recently emerged, duly greenwashed in order to create confusion... and greater business opportunities. While still at an early stage, so-called REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) projects are already being promoted as a market mechanism that can serve to “offset” carbon emissions. Carbon credits granted for leaving designated forested areas untouched could be sold on global carbon markets and bought by greenhouse gas polluting countries of the North, who could use them to help meet their emissions reductions commitments. In other words, another way to continue along with business as usual.

REDD is packaged in a way that actually seems quite appealing: what could be better for forest communities than to have the protection of their forests guaranteed, and to even get paid for conserving them? However, it is hard to believe that the same commercial forces that generated the current climate crisis have suddenly been converted into generous benefactors.

Communities who depend on forests for their survival would see their ways of life drastically changed. When a forested area is designated as a REDD project, local communities lose their rights to access resources they have always depended on, because any use of the forest (for gathering firewood or building materials, planting crops and other means of survival) would be considered “degradation” of the forest, since it would supposedly reduce the amount of carbon stored there. These restrictions will undoubtedly impact on food sovereignty, as well as the social fabric and cultural identity of indigenous and peasant communities.

Moreover, REDD cannot be seriously considered as a means of long-term reduction of carbon emissions. First of all, as we have already commented (see www.wrm.org.uy/publications/briefings/From_REDD_to_HEDD.pdf), REDD is based on the premise that carbon released through deforestation is the same as carbon produced by burning fossil fuels. This is a faulty premise, because climate change is not the result of emissions from forests, but rather of the constant increase in the total

stock of carbon in the atmosphere due to the burning of fossil fuels. It is this carbon, which has been stored underground for millions of years as coal, oil and gas, that is the cause of the problem. The resulting carbon emissions – which do not form part of the natural cycle of carbon continuously released and absorbed by plant life – began to accumulate in the atmosphere and gave rise to global warming, which in turn triggered climate change. To claim that carbon emissions from the use of fossil fuels can be “offset” simply by preventing emissions from deforestation is a false, misleading and lethal argument.

NO TO REDD

For these very reasons, social organizations around the world have increasingly raised warnings and overt opposition to REDD projects, expressed in the representative *Peoples Agreement* (April 22nd, Cochabamba, Bolivia) where more than 30.000 people, most of them representing social organisations, called on the developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50%, and to genuinely reduce emissions, rather than using deceptive strategies “that mask the failure of actual reductions in greenhouse gas emissions,” such as carbon markets and REDD, over which the Agreement expresses: “We condemn market mechanisms such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and its versions + and + +, which are violating the sovereignty of peoples and their right to prior free and informed consent as well as the sovereignty of national States, the customs of Peoples, and the Rights of Nature.” (17)

A REDD case study: Forest destroyer Oji Paper to carry out REDD feasibility study in Laos

In 2005, a Japanese company called Oji Paper took over a project to plant 50,000 hectares of mainly eucalyptus plantations in central Laos. The following year, as part of his research in Laos, a Canadian researcher took a series of photographs of forests cleared by Oji’s bulldozers. Now, Oji Paper wants to get REDD funding for its plantations in Laos.

The timing could not be better. Just weeks before Cancun, Oji Paper is demonstrating one of the most serious problems with the international discussions relating to REDD: the failure to differentiate between forests and plantations. Oji is also demonstrating how corporations can benefit from REDD while their operations have serious impacts on local livelihoods.

Oji Paper started another plantation project in Southern Laos earlier this year, covering a total of 30,000 hectares. The feasibility study, which starts this month and runs until March 2011, will look into potential REDD funding for Oji Paper’s plantations in central and southern Laos. The study is commissioned by Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. It is supposed to develop, “the methods to measure, present and evaluate effectiveness of plantation projects in CO₂ absorption and effectiveness of countermeasures against deforestation and forest degradation in reducing CO₂ emissions,” according to an Oji Paper press release.[1]

Oji Paper plans to export wood chips from its plantations in Laos to feed its ever-expanding pulp and paper operations. It will be interesting to see how the feasibility study takes into account the fact that Oji Paper's plantations will not store carbon for any length of time, but will be chipped, transported by road and sea and manufactured into paper. After use, much of this paper will be disposed of in landfills where it will rot and produce methane.

Oji Paper is one of the largest paper companies in the world, with a total of 240,000 hectares of plantations in Laos, Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Brazil. The company is planning a REDD programme and intends to apply the results of its feasibility study in Laos to its other plantations.

Between 2004 and 2006, Keith Barney, a researcher at York University, Toronto, carried out research in the village of Ban Pak Veng in Hinboun District in Laos. Barney described the village as suffering a "double displacement effect", the first caused by being downstream of the recently constructed Theun Hinboun dam and the second by Oji's plantations. "Through the land reform program," Barney writes, "village degraded forests, which are crucial for village food security and swidden production, have been zoned for industrial plantation production and bulldozed."

Oji's concession area in central Laos covers a total area of 154,000 hectares, of which a total of 50,000 hectares is to be planted. More than 55,000 people live inside this concession area.

In 2006, Oji commissioned the Global Environment Centre Foundation to carry out a feasibility study to investigate how Oji could gain carbon credits through the clean development mechanism (CDM). The report described villagers as carrying out "illegal slash-and-burn farming," and noted that they have "no other means to secure food."

Global Environment Centre Foundation's report stated that "local inhabitants in the subject area continue to practice illegal slash-and-burn farming and the spontaneous recovery of the forest cannot occur due to the land degradation."

As Barney pointed out, the report omitted to mention that villagers in Ban Pak Veng were "undertaking swidden farming not out of timeless tradition, but largely due to the loss of access to lowland paddy from the THPC [Theun Hinboun Power Company] hydropower project."

Barney added that the CDM feasibility study "ignores at least twenty years of research in Laos on the importance of upland farming and swidden based non-timber forest products in the rural economy." Barney documented in detail the complex relationship the villagers have with their land and forests and noted that the state officials, who are responsible for producing the maps for the land reform programme, "do not use anything like the same terms for landscape and forests as villagers do."

Unfortunately we can expect the REDD feasibility study on Oji Paper's plantations to make the same mistakes. It simply is not in the consultants' interest to find out and document what is actually happening in rural Laos. Meanwhile it is in their interest to

reduce complex social and environmental situations to simple questions of legality or illegality. They will also ignore local livelihoods. "As a result," as Barney wrote about Oji Paper's CDM plans, "a new set of livelihood risks are being pushed onto rural villagers in Laos, while the safety net of access to natural resources is removed from underneath them."

In 2006, a villager said, "We have no land. Oji has taken it." Another told Barney, "We are saying goodbye to our forests."

If the company responsible for this destruction can now claim to be reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, then the concept of REDD has become intellectually and morally bankrupt.

By Chris Lang, <http://chrislang.org>

[1] Thanks to Mekong Watch for the translation from Japanese.

An opportunity for real and crucial change

At this critical crossroads for the planet, the people's voices are calling out for a crucial change in direction.

The People's Agreement is the collectively drafted final declaration from the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, held in April 2010 in Cochabamba, Bolivia. The tens of thousands of participants agreed that "to face climate change, we must recognize Mother Earth as the source of life and forge a new system," based on principles such as "harmony and balance among all and with all things," "complementarity, solidarity and equality," and "the elimination of all forms of colonialism, imperialism and interventionism." This reaffirms the concept that nature has rights that must be respected, and that the goods and services necessary to meet the needs of human populations cannot be obtained at the cost of nature's destruction.

With regard to the climate crisis, the People's Agreement states: "We the peoples have the equal right to be protected from the adverse effects of climate change and reject the notion of adaptation to climate change as understood as a resignation to impacts provoked by the historical emissions of developed countries, which themselves must adapt their modes of life and consumption in the face of this global emergency. We see it as imperative to confront the adverse effects of climate change, and consider adaptation to be a process rather than an imposition, as well as a tool that can serve to help offset those effects, demonstrating that it is possible to achieve harmony with nature under a different model for living."

When thinking on policies that address the real causes of the problem, it would be necessary, as stated by GenderCC, that "policies and measures that aim to mitigate climate change were based on a more holistic understanding of human perception, values, and behavioural choices. That would include considering the specifics for different groups in society, including women and men. If policies are tailored to respond to the interests and needs of both women and men, and to further the goal of gender equality."

The crucial change, which is being shaped by the world's peoples, needs to be based on the concept of food sovereignty that implies supporting peasant and family agriculture.

La Via Campesina, an international network, points out that according to the IPCC, industrial agriculture is one of the leading causes of the increase in greenhouse gases emissions. This modern form of intensive farming based on increased yields through large-scale monocultures, concentration of land ownership and the massive use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides is contributing to the climate crisis through both the intensive use of fossil fuel energy it requires and the deforestation caused by its expansion into new territory.

In view of these facts, La Via Campesina has called for an end to industrial agriculture, which is destructive, polluting and fosters inequality, and the promotion of small-scale farming by peasant and indigenous communities as a way to both feed the world and cool the planet.

As highlighted by La Via Campesina: "Scientific research shows that peasant and indigenous peoples could reduce current global emissions to 75% by increasing biodiversity, recuperating soil organic matter, replacing industrial meat production with small-scale diversified food production, expanding local markets, halting deforestation and practicing integrated forest management. (18)

"Peasant agriculture not only contributes positively to the carbon balance of the planet, it also gives employment to 2.8 billion women and men around the world, and it remains the best way to combat hunger, malnutrition and the current food crisis.

"The right to land and the reclaiming of territories, food sovereignty, access to water as a common good and a human right, the right to use, conserve and exchange seeds, the de-concentration and promotion of local markets, are the indispensable conditions so that peasant and indigenous peoples can continue feeding the world and cooling the planet."

The peoples can use the Cancún Summit as another space to strengthen the integration of social movements, develop joint actions and strategies, and advance together towards real and crucial change.

Notes:

1 - Climate change: evidence from the geological record, The Geological Society, position statement on climate change

http://www.geolsoc.org.uk/gsl/views/policy_statements/climatechange

2 - Peoples Agreement, <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/support/>

3 - Final Conclusions working group 8: Climate Debt, <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2010/04/30/final-conclusions-working-group-n%C2%BA-8-climate-debt/>

4 - "Winner of Project Censored top 25 articles for 2009-2010 news stories: Pentagon's role in global catastrophe", Sara Flounders, International Action Center, http://www.iacenter.org/o/world/climatesummit_pentagon121809/

- 5 - The Rich: Our Biggest Carbon Problem, Barry Saxifrage, 12 February 2009, [http://www.saxifrages.org/eco/go19a/The Rich Our Biggest Carbon Problem](http://www.saxifrages.org/eco/go19a/The_Rich_Our_Biggest_Carbon_Problem)
 - 6 - <http://www.breathingearth.net/>
 - 7 - Broder 2009 quoted in "The End of 'Cheap Ecology' and the Crisis of 'Long Keynesianism'," Farshad Araghi, January 23, 2010, Economic and Political Weekly, disseminated by Larry Lohman.
 - 8 - International Organization for Migration, <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/facts-and-figures/lang/en>
 - 9 - "Murder on the Carbon Express: Interpol Takes On Emissions Fraud", Mark Schapiro for Mother Jones, 8 October 2010, <http://motherjones.com/environment/2010/10/interpol-carbon-trading-fraud>
 - 10 - Figures from CO2Now, <http://co2now.org/>
 - 11- Potential Impacts of Tree Plantation Projects under the CDM: An African Case Study, 07 October 2010, Blessing Karumbidza y Wally Menne, The Timberwatch Coalition, http://timberwatch.org/uploads/Draft%20Plantation_Projects_under%20CDM%20-%20Blessing%20&%20Wally%281%29.pdf
 - 12 - "Could Biochar save the world?", Jeremy Hance, 16 August 2010, <http://bit.ly/cALKwk>
 - 13 - "Biochar, a new big threat to people, land and ecosystems", Declaration, <http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/agrofuels/Biochar.pdf>
 - 14 - "Geoengineering the planet: What is at stake for Africa?", Diana Bronson, ETC Group, <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/67522>
 - 15 - "The new biomassers and their assault on livelihoods", Jim Thomas, ETC Group, 07 October 2010, <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/67535>
 - 16 - "Driving to destruction. The impacts of Europe's biofuel plans on carbon emissions and land", noviembre 2010, http://www.foeeurope.org/agrofuels/ILUC_report_November2010.pdf
 - 17 - <http://cmpcc.org/acuerdo-de-los-pueblos/>
 - 18 - "Thousands of Cancúns for climate justice!" Declaration by La Via Campesina, 1 September 2010. http://www.viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=941:the-people-create-thousands-of-solutions-to-confront-climate-change&catid=48:-climate-change-and-agrofuels&Itemid=75
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