

Carbon Fundamentalism vs. Climate Justice

By Gopal Dayaneni

Imagine waking up on December 1, 1999, and learning about the World Trade Organization (WTO) for the first time by watching it fall apart. The catalyst? An internationalist “inside-outside” strategy that leveraged people power on the outside to provide political space inside for the Global South and civil society organizations. (See box.)

The potential for such a political moment is once again upon us, exactly 10 years after the collapse of the WTO in Seattle, Wash. This time, it’s the 15th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which will meet in Copenhagen, Denmark on December 7, 2009, for 12 days to forge a climate policy that will succeed the initial commitments set by the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. The goal is to substantially reduce atmospheric concentrations of heat-trapping greenhouse gasses while addressing the consequences of climate disruption already underway. Global warming has already disproportionately impacted the small island states, coastal peoples, indigenous peoples, and the poor throughout the world, particularly in Africa.

As Clayton Thomas-Muller of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) observes, “In the U.S. and across the globe, the movement for climate justice has been steadily growing; not simply demanding action on climate, but demanding rights-based and justice-based action on climate that confronts false solutions, root causes of climate change, and amplifies the voices of those least responsible and most directly impacted. Not only are we the frontline of impacts, we are the frontline of survival....”

UNFCCC should not be thought of as being just about climate change, nor should climate change be thought of as simply setting targets for reducing atmospheric concentrations of carbon. These negotiations are about everything: international trade; forests; food and agriculture; the rights of the indigenous and forest peoples; resource privatization; inter-

national finance (private and public); development rights; oceans; rivers; technology; intellectual property; migration, displacement and refugees; and biodiversity, to name a few. The reduction of emissions is only one part of the negotiations.

The Framework Treaty itself mandates that we “protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.” How we implement, calculate, and pay for it all is the heart of the matter.

Inside the Outside

We all have a lot at stake. Ruling elites and corporations are exercising disproportionate pressure on climate policy both domestically and internationally to ensure that their interests—continued industrial

The Battle of Seattle

At the third WTO Ministerial Conference in 1999, negotiations were stopped in their tracks by massive street protests outside the convention center and by concerted resistance from the governments of the Global South who were represented inside. The scale and breadth of the coalition against ever more inequitable trade agreements is a landmark in progressive organizing. Labor, environmentalists, faith-based organizations, and non-governmental groups of all sorts made common cause with the demands of the Global South. Despite six Ministerial discussions which have been organized since 1999, the WTO still has not been able to reach substantial new agreements and looks likely to miss its newest deadline in 2010.—*Ed.* ■

exploitation of land and people in the service of growth and profit, and the commodification of atmospheric space through carbon trading—are preserved. Whereas, social movements like Via Campesina, Third World Network, the indigneous peoples' movement, and international labor organizations, together with the African Union, a few Latin American countries, and the Association of Small Island States are working to create the political space for a rights-based, justice-based approach to ecological sustainability that addresses the historic causes of climate change and its disproportionate impacts.

In the United States, the Environmental Justice movement has given rise to the Climate Justice movement, which has fought to raise the voices of those communities least responsible but most severely impacted—viz., poor people of color and indigenous peoples—and demands a climate policy that redresses existing economic and environmental inequality. According to Nia Robinson, director of the Environmen-

tal Justice and Climate Change Initiative, "The successful creation of climate policy cannot happen without the input of communities that have suffered as a result of the United States' fossil fuel addiction. Our government must begin to recognize these communities as experts or run the risk of creating policies that will do as much harm, if not more, than climate change itself."

But Orin Langel, co-director of the Global Justice Ecology Project believes that, "The Copenhagen climate talks have been hijacked. Copenhagen is becoming no more than a CorporateHaven for trade talks by corporations." The best we can hope for then is to stop some of the worst policies from taking hold and create the political space needed for social movements to pressure governments into responding to the needs of the people and the biosphere. If we can weaken the influence of corporations directly or through their proxy states, most notably the United States, we may be able to put the brakes on their attempted land, air, and water grab.



Tom Goldtooth

The climate bill, unfortunately, has been co-opted by the oil and coal industry. It's a situation where we again have politics over science. And for our network and our constituency on the frontline of unsustainable energy policy, from Alaska to the tip of Argentina, to the indigenous people in Nigeria, it's business as usual. We don't see democracy in the process of decisions being made around climate policy, whether it's domestically, like the Waxman-Markey bill, or globally. It's business as usual.

We had high hopes, and we still do, but it's going to take the political will of the people, [not] discussions behind closed doors. That's something that's really a big concern for us here as American Indian and Alaska natives. Our communities and many of the people in America have been locked out of the process that's happening between the big environmental organizations and big industry.

We are part of the 350 million indigenous peoples throughout the world. The [U.N. meetings concerning the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples] mark the first time that 400 indigenous peoples came together from every region in the world to discuss the impacts of climate change.

We all agreed that we are at the frontlines with disproportionate impacts. There has to be a human rights framework to address this issue. We came out of this meeting in consensus: we've got to have aggressive emission targets. We agreed

that we need to push the industrialized countries like America and Canada to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent by 2020 using 1990 levels, and 95 to 100 percent by 2050. We have the technology to do that.

A well-financed and very powerful oil and coal industry is [in negotiations] with these large environmental organizations that don't have constituencies. I think [support for the current climate bill] is a sellout position. I think the people of America are smarter than that. But America needs to have more understanding of where we're at with climate change and what market-based solutions the government and corporations are developing. ■

Tom Goldtooth is the co-director of the Indigenous Environmental Network headquartered at Bemidji, Minnesota. This interview is excerpted from a transcript courtesy of Democracy Now. Photo courtesy of the International Institute for Sustainable Development.



Carbon Fundamentalism: False Framing

The current focus on climate change provides an unprecedented opportunity to make much needed deep systemic alterations necessary to achieve greater equity, justice, and democracy as we weather the unavoidable transition. Unfortunately, the narrow focus on “carbon reduction” only serves to exacerbate the root causes of inequity.

The view that the problem is a technical one, which can be addressed through narrow technological or policy solutions, is a strategic construct of the center-right.

The dominant framing of the problem is that we must stabilize the amount of carbon in the atmosphere at 450 ppm, or more aggressively, at 350 ppm by 2050, to avoid a mean atmospheric temperature rise of 2° Celsius. Getting national governments to agree to such targets is considered better than nothing. Granted, the atmospheric carbon concentration levels are an indicator of the problem and must be addressed, but such a narrow framing hides the larger ecological context and the inequitable economic system that got us here.

The technical framing of popular films, such as “An Inconvenient Truth,” which detail the growth and consequences of atmospheric concentrations of carbon, including some doomsday predictions, only

reveal the tip of the melting iceberg. Such films have been used to promote solutions that seem “practical” because they are politically “viable” and considered “reasonable” under the current system. In truth, many of these proposals—such as, the large-scale shifting of arable land use from food production to agro-fuel production, carbon trading regimes, and synthetic biology—have huge negative consequences for poverty, food security, water security, human rights, and biological and cultural diversity. Nor do they resolve the carbon problem.

As Anne Petermann of the Global Justice Ecology Project puts it, “Carbon Fundamentalism corrupts the science, ignores the interrelationships of the biosphere, and ignores human rights and equity by encouraging the continuation of over-production for over-consumption, entrenching the consolidation of profit and power.”

Without a holistic, integrated approach to the ecological crisis that is grounded in science but predicated on justice and equity, we will simply shift the problem around, make it worse, and further compromise our survival.

Dirt Behind the Clean Development Mechanism

One clear example of deliberate deception by the Industrialized North is the Clean Development

Photo:

Climate Justice Now!
action at United Nations
conference, Poznan,
Poland.

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Mechanism (CDM) established at the first round of the Kyoto Protocol. It is a system created to manage carbon “offsets” and give polluters the appearance of reducing their overall carbon emissions by funding purported “low-carbon” development in the Global South. Under this scheme, the European Union, for example, can increase the number of cars on its road but balance its carbon budget by paying a developing country to protect its own forests or use more efficient energy technologies. Not surprisingly, opponents of the scheme call it, “trying to lose weight by paying someone else to go on a diet.”

David Victor, a Stanford University Law Professor who coauthored a study of the CDM reveals that, “Between one- and two-thirds of all CDM offsets do not represent actual emission cuts.” Another study by the non-governmental organization International Rivers, shows that nearly three-quarters of all CDM-funded projects were already complete at the time of their approval, hence not dependent on the funding. According to Payal Parekh, an oceanographer and climate scientist who works with International Rivers, “Ultimately, you cannot really prove or disprove whether a project is truly ‘additional,’ because it

requires one to know what would have happened [without the funding]. Without the aid of a fortune teller's crystal ball, this is simply impossible.”

Clearly, CDMs provide little, if any, protection for poor communities and communities of color impacted by existing dirty industry and destructive offsets. The narrowly focused “offsets” often finance such ecologically destructive projects as mega dams, plantation forests, and industrial agro-fuels—projects which invariably result in the displacement of peoples and a violation of their rights. Yet, CDMs represent one of the primary financing mechanisms advanced by the rich countries and corporations.

On the other hand, several peoples’ movements around the world and nations, such as Bolivia and the entire African Union, are calling for “Ecological Debt” as a fair financing mechanism for mitigation and adaptation. Ecological Debt is the debt owed by the Industrialized North to the Global South for the “historical and current resource-plundering, environmental degradation, and dumping of greenhouse gases and toxic wastes,” according to Acción Ecológica, an environmental rights organization based in Quito, Ecuador. It is a reparations approach favored

Photo:

Members of Grassroots Global Justice march against the G-20 meetings held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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by impacted nations, as opposed to the “offset and obfuscate” approach supported by the United States and the European Union.

As Patrick Bond, director of the Centre for Civil Society in Durban frames it, there are basically two ways for the Global North to pay back the hard-hit Global South for the climate crisis: “Through complicated, corrupt, controversial [CDM] projects with plenty of damaging side effects to communities, or... through other mechanisms that must provide financing quickly, transparently, and decisively, to achieve genuine income compensation plus renewable energy to the masses.”

The Tipping Point

A recent poll by *The Guardian* of London revealed that almost nine out of 10 climate scientists do not believe political efforts to restrict global warming to 2° Celsius will succeed. “Given soaring carbon emissions and political constraints, an average rise of four to five degrees Celsius by the end of this century is more likely,” they say. Such a rise in temperature will almost certainly be catastrophic for life on this planet.

Additionally, a synthesis report on climate science issued in June this year warns that climate change will proceed faster than predicted over the next five years, and that we are running a very high risk of breaching some tipping points, including the melting of the Greenland ice sheet.

The scale and pace of the crisis demands immediate, forceful, and systemic action. We must fully appreciate and understand that we are in the throes of a climate crisis and that change is inevitable. What matters most now is how that change occurs and who leads the transition. History teaches that when societies and economies go through major transitions, the balance of social forces is incredibly important. The degree to which our new future embodies equity, justice, and democracy as we move through these economic and ecologic changes depends entirely on how well we position popular social movements to take control of the transition.



Road to Copenhagen Paved with Opportunities

Copenhagen is a strategic opportunity to further build a trans-local movement that integrates ecological sustainability and economic justice and coordinates the power of social movements to build the capacity of communities to weather the transition. Beyond Copenhagen, we must set our sights on the United States Social Forum in Detroit in 2010.

We’ve already seen the West Coast climate action against Chevron link the local impacts of fossil fuels in Richmond, Calif. to the global impacts of climate change. The Mobilization for Climate Justice (www.actforclimatejustice.org) is a national coalition that has anchored several actions in recent months, including ones at the launch of the United Nations meeting in New York and the G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh in September. It has actions planned to mark the 10th anniversary of the Seattle WTO.

Even as the United States Congress is poised to pass a climate bill that will commodify atmospheric space and give the worst industries the right to pollute, an explosion of local solutions are emerging across the country.

The time to act is now, while we still have room to breathe. ■

Photo: Protest during the UNFCCC climate negotiations launching the World Bank Forest Carbon Partnership Facility at the Grand Hyatt, Bali.

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

(Front cover) San Francisco Financial District, Sept 21, 2009. ©2009 West Coast Mobilization for Climate Justice / Rainforest Action Network.

(Inside Front) Richmond refinery. ©2008 Scott Braley. (Inside Back) Urban garden in Havana Cuba. © John and Faith Morgan / www.powerofcommunity.com.

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