

“Climate Action from Below”

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts on the climate crisis at this very important seminar. The comments shared refer to the overall global situation, but the emphasis is on the unjust burden climate change places on vulnerable territories, nations and regions.

As is well known, the core injustice in the climate crisis is that those that contributed little or nothing to the crisis bear the brunt of the impacts. This injustice has persisted and a climate debt has been accumulated over the years and this debt cannot be wished away. The notion of loss and damage may cover costs of current harms suffered, but the historical debt will have to be discussed and settled, just as the historical carbon in the atmosphere cannot be ignored. However, the payment of climate debt is not all about finance but principally about decolonizing the atmospheric space and redistributing what is left of the meagre carbon budget.

While the world largely recognises that global warming is driven mostly by human actions, responsibility for taking actions to mitigate those impacts and to stop future build ups, is being negated, overshadowed and silenced. The unjust nature of the crisis gets blatantly ignored when the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is replaced by voluntary actions as seen in the celebrated *Nationally Determined Contributions* of the Paris Agreement. Even the provision of climate finance is made to look like acts of charity rather than as an action that recognizes the fact that climate change is a global problem in an interconnected world.

It is self-evident that climate impacts on Africa and other vulnerable regions are not mere speculations. Floods, droughts, desertification, coastal erosion, failing crops, and displacement of populations are some of the manifestations. These impacts touch on every area of life – deepening poverty, hunger, human insecurity as well as health and socio-economic challenges.

GLOBAL WARMING IS GLOBAL

Although global warming does not respect geographical boundaries, some rich nations appear to think that they are immune to its impacts. Time and time again, this false notion has been overthrown by extreme weather events such as hurricanes and floods. Nevertheless, that ingrained sense of resilience and immunity continues to drive climate inaction. Where actions are taken, these are sometimes blatantly hypocritical, if not fictional. Here we are referring to the resorting to market environmentalism where avenues are found to offset carbon emissions rather than cutting such emissions at source. Emissions offsetting is a clever way of letting polluters off the hook and forcing the victims of climate change to bear the load of climate action.

Moreover, rather than push for a rapid transition from dirty energy sources such as coal, some clever persons invented the idea of *clean coal*. The notion that technology can fix whatever havoc humans manage to bring up tends to shift responsibility to future generations as in the concept of *carbon capture and storage*. This is also this mind-set allows corporations seek to appropriate the switches of the global climate thermostat through geo-engineering while others pursue a variety of means of manipulating and subverting nature. In this mode, the climate crisis is seen as a business opportunity and as means of accumulating profit.

With regard to the massively polluting crude oil, world leaders choose to look the other way during climate negotiations. The silence over the fossil fuels in the climate negotiations has been a perverse incentive for many nations to engage in the search for, and extreme extraction of more of the fossil fuels, ignoring the fact that science has shown that up to 80 per cent of *known* reserves should be

left untapped and unburned.¹ The continued silence allows corporate interests to trump the clear evidence of science. This silence must be broken.

Now is the time for rapid and massive transition to renewable energies. The fact that renewables bring about a new logic helps to underline the truth that gigantic power grids are archaic and promotes community and regional systems. If this is backed up with the socialisation of the production, ownership and distribution of energy systems, the ripple effect would be felt in wider social relations circles. Regions like Africa stand to gain from this reality as investment that would have been used in constructing massive grids would be used in energy generation and distribution through discrete and autonomous systems. This is an urgent and inevitable path to take and the African Renewable Energy Initiative² (AREI) should be resolutely pursued.

The words of Hermann Scheer are very apt here, “If the transition from the nuclear and fossil to renewable energy is only carried out in a piecemeal and gradual manner, then it is highly likely that world civilization will be thrown into a staggering crisis affecting everyone and everything: dramatic climate change threatens to make entire habitats unfit to live in and to trigger mass misery and the migration of hundreds of millions of people.”

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Climate change is fundamentally a systemic crisis, a crisis of a civilisation built on the rapacious destruction of nature through massive consumption and wastage of resources. It is the consequence of ruinous production and consumption patterns that are blind to the fact that Planet Earth is finite and that there must be a point when such a path becomes unsustainable in many ways.³ Entrenched and dominant global systems ensure that only token actions are taken.

There are three ways to address climate injustice. First, rich nations must reduce their rapacious consumption patterns and address the climate crisis with real solutions and not ones that have been seen to be false. Second, the rich nations have to support the poor nations who are being forced to adapt to a situation they did not create. One way of practically making that to happen is through the support for sustainable low-carbon production and energy paths. Thirdly, the victims of climate change must join forces to enhance their resilience.

The acceptance of the current non-binding nationally determined pledge-and-review system places the world on the way to warming by as much as 4 to 7 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. This sounds the death knell for vulnerable Small Island States and the nations of Africa. The reluctance of rich and highly polluting nations to take real actions on climate change has rightly been described as a form of apartheid and this gruesome *apartheid* is against Mother Earth and our relatives, the other species besides humans.

It is useful to note that although the USA has a mere 5% of the world’s population she emits nearly 25% of the world’s greenhouse gases⁴ from the burning of oil, gas, and coal – for driving cars, producing electricity, and running industries. It is encouraging to see that states and cities in the

¹ Roz Pidcock. 2015. Meeting two degrees Climate target means 80 per cent of world’s coal is “unburnable”, study says. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/meeting-two-degree-climate-target-means-80-per-cent-of-worlds-coal-is-unburnable-study-says>

² See at www.arei.org

³ Nnimmo Bassey. 2016. **Oil Politics – Echoes of Ecological Wars**. Daraja Press.

⁴ Anthony Leiserowitz. 2005. Climate Change Risk Perception and Policy Preferences: The role of Affect, Imagery, and Values. See at <http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication-OFF/files/LeiserowitzClimaticChange.pdf>

country are standing up and pledging climate action irrespective of the direction that the central government takes.

TEMPLATES FOR ACTION

Official negotiations have blocked real climate action until possibly 2020. By that time, the world may already be in the throes of runaway climate change. Hope is not lost, however, as there is a real possibility of regaining of peoples' sovereignty over political structures as was evidenced by the epochal World Peoples Conference on Climate Change held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in April 2010. That conference showed very clearly that climate action can be driven from below. The climate marches that we have witnessed in recent times illustrate the impatience and the building of movements from below that will ultimately force real climate action.

The Cochabamba conference produced the Peoples Agreement.⁵ as a key outcome. It demanded that countries cut their emissions by at least 50 per cent at source without resorting to carbon offsets and other trading schemes. In terms of financing adaptation and mitigation, the Agreement required that developed countries commit 6 per cent of their GDP for these needs. It is clear that merely opening a Green Climate Fund or account with nothing in it will not begin to tackle the problems.

100 billion US dollars seems a huge outlay that is hard to raise, but think about the hundreds of billions of dollars spent annually to maintain nuclear weapons. When we also think about the trillions of dollars spent annually on warfare by the rich nations, the seriousness to tackle global warming becomes suspect. The means of mobilizing the funds remain complicated and contested with many insisting that it should all be new funds rather than being tied to foreign development aid, private finance and the like.

THERE ARE SOLUTIONS

Solutions to the deepening climate crisis were proffered at the World Peoples Climate Change Summit held at Cochabamba, Bolivia in April 2010. The conference fingered capitalism as the root cause of the climate crisis. The summit was convened after COP15 showed in sharp terms that the formal negotiations were not headed towards real solutions.

The summit called for the decolonisation of the atmosphere and a United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth. The idea of the Rights of Nature fundamentally changes our relationship with the Earth and ultimately would demand that economics places ecological and community at its core

In terms of finance, the Peoples Agreement demands that developed countries commit 6% of their GDP to finance adaptation and mitigation needs. The financial suggestions of the Copenhagen Accord are a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed to secure vulnerable peoples and nations.

The world needs to move towards promoting well-being and not continue on the path of domination of others and of conspicuous and wasteful consumption. The Peoples Conference debated this key sector and reached the agreement that the way to a sustainable future is through the enthronement of food sovereignty based on agro-ecological and peasant based agricultural systems. Water is a

⁵ See World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth Peoples Agreement at <https://pwccc.wordpress.com/support/>

public trust and an inalienable human right and the continued global destruction of the world's water and its commodification was clearly rejected in the Peoples Agreement.

CONCLUSION

The negotiations at the Conference of Parties of the UNFCCC continue to drag away from real solutions and instead move deeper into offset regimes, depending on market forces that have clearly driven the world into financial, economic and political crises. Larry Lohmann⁶ reminds us that When Sir Nicholas Stern, climate change advisor to Tony Blair's government, famously said in 2007 that global warming was 'the greatest market failure the world has ever seen', the implication was that, given the proper price signals, addressing it could be a market success.

We need to evaluate the creed that presents the market as holding the solution to every problem and the key to human progress and happiness in the face of the crises it has spawned. Humans cannot trade their way out of the impending climate catastrophe. Neither can nations wall themselves away from climate impacts. Less than ten per cent of the budgets wasted on wars by rich nations would more than take care of helping vulnerable nations build resilience as well as adapt to the unfortunate situation they are driven into. The same can be said of the funding of the SDGs.

The current trend wherein development is measured in terms of pollution must be halted. Levels of carbon emission should be a measure of irresponsibility and not one of well-being. The more polluting a country is, the more irresponsible it should be seen to be and such countries should be held accountable for their impacts on the planet.

We must remind ourselves that with rising tide, receding coast lines and glaciers, increased desertification, droughts, floods, conflicts, famines and critical challenges to food production, global warming cannot be tackled on the basis of national self-interest or nationally determined actions without an eye on the aggregate outcomes. Add to that mix the reduction of resilience by the continued and needless warfare and the accompanied forceful displacement of populations and the future realities become starker. The world needs urgent actions to ensure rapid transiting from the current fossil fuels driven path and build transformation solutions on a renewable and sustainable path. The key nodes of this agenda will include:

- Reclaiming peoples control over their resources
- Redirecting military budgets for climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Legislation – such as the Rights of Mother Earth
- Recognition of ecocide as an international crime and the commencement of the prosecution of eco-criminals akin to what happens at the current International Court of Justice, but not allowing any nation or corporation to opt out.
- Leaving fossil fuels in the soil
- Having binding agreements for emissions reduction

The climate future will be largely determined by the how humankind's fossil fixation is handled. Will the lure of financial profit from the extraction and burning of coal, crude oil and gas trump the realities of the fact that we are more or less at the precipice? Would the harm already done to vulnerable Small Island States, Pacific, African, Asian, Arctic communities and others be ignored or would the world eventually wake up to face the menace?

⁶ Larry Lohmann. 28 October 2011. **The Endless Algebra of Climate Markets.**
<http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/sites/thecornerhouse.org.uk/files/LohmannCNSarticle.pdf>

