

Indigenous Peoples and Climate Negotiations

As members of the global indigenous peoples' health caucus, Committee on Indigenous Health members prepared a number of technical briefing papers for the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues – most of us who were attending the second session were focused on the activities of the so-called UN specialized programs and bodies. To most of the world today, this maze-like array of formidable, monolithic organizations are confusing enough to understand; for indigenous and tribal peoples, communities and their mostly rural or desert/forest-based organizations, they more often than not represent well-armed, determined organs of all hues of institutionalized colonialism – neo-liberal colonialism, bio-colonialism, the "un" free market and globalization.

The Economic and Social Council's new baby – the Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues is a functional commission that was established in 2000, one of the achievements of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. With a bewildering mandate that covers socio-economic, environment, health, culture, education and human rights issues, the Forum's members as well as the observers who attend its sessions are all in the same boat, looking for an effective rudder and fair winds.

It was clearly evident by the second session that for indigenous peoples, the Forum has a mandate that is very different from our expectations, quite different from the Sub-Commission's Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP). The concerns for us are growing as we become increasingly aware that the working methods and decision making process of the Forum has large gaps and weaknesses that need to be addressed very swiftly if we are to get any coherent sense and useful function out of this new body.

Evidently, there is lots to learn and we are all "learning by doing", as many specialized organs and bodies of the UN are fond of saying. The problem with this approach is that very little is actually learnt too late by too few by this doing. The danger in this is that many indigenous peoples and small communities are in a desperate struggle for survival and extinction is too near, and this form of learning is really too expensive for us.

Take for example, the negotiations and process under the Kyoto Protocol of the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). As an indigenous person involved in the anti-dams campaign in my own province in India, I participated in a lobbying tour of some selected Western European countries during late May and early June which culminated in a press briefing during the 18th meeting of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technical Advice (SBSTA) of the Kyoto Protocol in Bonn. This protocol was adopted to implement and make possible some very unrealistic targets for greenhouse gas emission reductions for the so-called Annex-1 countries (the industrialized culprits of global warming) provided in the Framework Convention.

The Kyoto Protocol and its Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) is a notoriously cynical and vicious new arrangement and mechanism to convert the last frontier after the "commons" - the very air we breathe and live by - into a private, market driven "bazaar" of futures of enclosed

atmospheric spaces. In the near future, you may find that not only your lands and forests but the air above and around your village has been sold and owned by some multi- or trans-national company with foreign shareholders in a distant land. The World Bank set up its Prototype Carbon Fund (PCF) to "learn by doing" how to fund destructive and unsustainable and highly controversial projects such as large dams and mono-culture plantations through private parties. These projects are theoretically within the purview of the Bank's operational policies for indigenous peoples, environment, forests, gender, etc. but they hardly see them being applied because it is "learning by doing". Meanwhile, indigenous communities in South East Asia along the Mekong, in Indonesia, in Uganda, in Guatemala, in Minas Gerais and Espirito Santo in Brazil are deprived of their lands, water, rivers, health and livelihoods. So, we learn. For how much longer?

The CDM has no space for indigenous peoples, just as ten years down the line since the Earth Summit of 1992 we have none at the UNFCCC and its Protocol, despite indigenous peoples being one of the "major groups" and our Rio and Johannesburg declarations and plans of actions, Agenda 21, and so on. In fact, the CDM has nothing to do actually with climate change! For, developed countries would continue to burn fossil fuels at ever increasing rates while they buy ever cheaper fictitious carbon credits to feel justified and morally cleansed for polluting and ultimately destroying Earth. The CDM is another global market, "it is not about charity" and "it is not about development" as a government representative involved in the climate negotiations candidly revealed. Organizations, brokers and certification mechanisms for clean and sustainable development practices have suddenly mushroomed in the West, highly paid consultants with Bachelors degrees in accountancy from strange institutions travel hurriedly to our distant lands to "inspect" project sites and "consult" with stakeholders, constantly looking at their watches and electronic notebooks, and ultimately to validate and write certificates that are meaningless to us but would do us great harm.

So why do we continue to engage at all with such processes filled with lies and devoid of morality and true commitments? We are now, whether we like it or want it or not, forced to play this game in the field we have agreed upon, by the rules we have acquiesced to, so we have to play it well or never show up. With this belief, we shall continue to attempt and support any activity that can enhance the usefulness and effectiveness of the Forum. We must continue to encourage and exhort the specialized UN agencies and bodies to become sensitive to our voices, to respect our rights, and work with them within a mutually respectful and consultative, cooperative partnership to achieve our objectives. We must prise our way into these difficult negotiations, not leave it to NGOs, claim our legitimate places and work our role if we believe that these can serve our collective aspirations and agenda. We must also have the courage to reject them outright and claim no part to these negotiations if they are proven to be destructive to us, devoid of morality and political commitment. That is the only way we can play a constructive and positive role. The question, is this enough?

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