

Kyoto: What's to Celebrate? Activists Put Kofi Annan on Notice

Wednesday, 16 February 2005

While many are celebrating the Kyoto Protocol's entering into force this week, others are finding cause for grave concern.

A coalition of NGOs, social and environmental activists, communities, scientists and economists from around the world concerned about the climate crisis, the Durban Group, charged that the 1997 climate treaty not only fails to cut greenhouse gas emissions enough to avert climate catastrophe, but also steals from the poor to give to the rich.

The Kyoto Protocol says that industrialized country signatories must reduce their emissions 5.2% below 1990 levels by 2008-2012. However, the group noted, the scientific community has called for global reductions of over 60% below 1990 levels.

What's more, the carbon trading promoted by the Protocol hands Northern governments and corporations lucrative tradable rights use the earth's natural carbon-cycling capacity, effectively stealing a public good away from most of the planet's inhabitants.

Just last month, Danish power utility Energi E2 sold hundreds of thousands of dollars of the rights it had been granted free by its government to Shell after mild temperatures kept the utility's carbon emissions below expected levels. No such free rights have been granted to ordinary citizens.

The Kyoto Protocol's attempt to create "carbon dioxide-saving" projects in poorer countries is meanwhile stirring protest from Brazil to South Africa. Such projects "which include industrial tree plantations and schemes to burn off landfill gas" are designed to license big emitters in the rich North to go on using fossil fuels. But they usurp land or water ordinary people need for other purposes.

"We're creating a sort of "climate apartheid," wherein the poorest and darkest-skinned pay the highest price for their land, and, in some cases, with their lives" for continued carbon profligacy by the rich," said Soumitra Ghosh of the National Forum of Forest Peoples and Forest Workers in India.

Worse, such carbon projects don't work. "Even in purely economic terms, a market in credits from "carbon-saving" projects will fail," said Jutta Kill of Sinkswatch, a British-based watchdog organization. "You simply can't verify whether a power plant's emissions can be "compensated for" by a tree plantation or other project. Ultimately investors are bound to lose confidence in the credits they buy from such projects."

Kill noted that almost all of the methods proposed so far for proving how much carbon is saved by Kyoto's "carbon-saving" projects have been rejected by the UN itself. "People are beginning to realize that this is ENRON accounting," she said.

Ricardo Carrere of the World Rainforest Movement added that "so-called carbon sink plantations will result in the further spread of monoculture tree plantations, which are already having enormous impacts on people and the environment". The Kyoto Protocol also allows genetically engineered trees to be used in carbon-absorbing plantations. "This will open up a Pandora's box of impacts we can't even guess at," said Anne Petermann of Global Justice Ecology Project in the US.

One of the biggest promoters of the carbon market, including "carbon-saving" projects in poor nations, is the World Bank, ironically also a major financier of fossil fuel developments.

“It’s ridiculous that the Bank, which has a mission of entrenching the fossil fuel industry, is now advertising itself as solving the climate crisis,” said Nadia Martinez of the Sustainable Energy and Environment Network in Washington.

“If we are to avert a climate crisis, drastic reductions in fossil fuel investment and use are inescapable, as is the protection of remaining native forests,” confirmed Heidi Bachram of Carbon Trade Watch. “We’re joining many other movements of Northern and Southern peoples to take the climate back into our hands.”

Members of the Durban Group are today sending an open letter to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan excoriating the UN’s failure to take constructive action and giving notice of their intention to build independent alliances to “express governments to limit fossil fuel extraction and use while supporting grassroots alliances struggling against fossil fuel exploration, extraction and use and against unjust “climate mitigation” projects.”

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. Carbon Market Daily, 7 February 2005, www.pointcarbon.com.

2. For interviews: Winnie Overbeek, Sajida Khan, Soumitra Ghosh (above).

3. SEEN, Wrong Turn from Rio, www.seen.org.

View the letter sent by the
Durban Group to Kofi Annan

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