Editorial: Walk the Talk – Putting climate justice into action

Wendy Harcourt

So, why is the journal entitled climate justice and development rather than climate change and development? It is after all climate change that the many intergovernmental meetings, articles, in-depth media reporting, books, newspaper articles and blogs are talking about. We have scientific reports, technological solutions and a plethora of economic predictions rolling out the figures. The costs of global warming are dire. Governments, with scientific and expert economic backing, all pronounce that climate change is a threat to humanity and nature. We must take action or else the globe suffers the consequences. Corporations are entreated to change their ways, and emissions are to be controlled and traded. At a minimum, jet setters are asked to pay a bit more towards the cost of their flight to the atmosphere. Citizens are to take public transport and save CO₂ emissions. No one can question it; we are in the grips of climate change.

Indeed we are, but the issue is not about the amount of damage climate change will wreak on future economies and human prosperity. It is how we respond to it. It is clearly a matter for global concern and requires global action. So, is the answer to call a halt to the growing new super economies of China and India? Hold the US and Europe to ransom until they take responsibility for the global environment? Is the answer to put the Kyoto Protocol into action? Do we encourage corporations to go green? Or should we look at how to engineer carbon-eating trees? Or grow corn and convert it into biofuels? Is ethanol the solution? What about low cost solar energy solutions? Can we create a world economy based on biotechnology, where some low cost and environmentally benign technology backstops carbon emissions? These are just some of the economic and scientific proposals on the table. Several of these are addressed in the articles in this journal edition.

But in many ways discussing these proposals, and how to implement them, including those in place such as carbon trading, miss the point. The response is not a technological one, or even an economic one, nor, despite all the pronouncements at high-level intergovernmental meetings, a policy one. The real issue is about what principles and what ethics with which we respond. In short, we are talking about taking political ecology and social justice seriously. We are talking about the injustice of making those people who have contributed the least to climate change to be the ones that pay, again the price of other peoples' lifestyles.

What is needed is a systemic change. Climate change forces us to see that the dominant development model is not working. It is not enough for individuals in the North to start recycling, to buy 'eco' and 'bio' products, to pay a little more on the air ticket to 'off set' costs, to turn off the taps and lights to 'save' water and energy. None of this will be enough. The emphasis on individual behaviour only distracts attention away from corporations and governments, who determine policies on a daily basis that lead to massive scale ecological destruction.

But there is also the danger that the huge and deafening cries about climate change are starting a global panic with the pronouncement that global warming is THE greatest threat to the ecology of our planet. The arguments are bitter and passionate. The need is for urgent solutions, NOW. But the problem is precisely that those shrill cries about global warming are distracting our attention from the serious issues that are far more dangerous to our planet and humanity that are part and parcel of the same factors that produced climate change. The surging food prices, conflicts over natural resources, nuclear weaponry and environmental degradation are intertwined with the deepening social injustice marked by growing hunger, and diseases that are shortening lives for the majority of the world's people. Food scarcity is related to the use of agricultural land for biofuels. Large numbers of people in the developing world can no longer buy staple foods so that North Americans can discover ways to ensure that they can continue driving SUVs. The point in developing biofuels is not to save the environment; it is to reduce dependence on oil rich states. The carbon trade offs are not saving the environment they are creating wealth for the speculators.

If we are to find solutions to climate change we have to speak about justice. We need to think squarely about a change in ethics, and a change in who takes responsibility for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions. The focus has to be on changing the ethics of the industrialized economies that have relied on cheap energy – in the form of oil, coal and gas – to fuel development based on economic growth.

As the articles in the issue point out, global warming leading to increasingly frequent and devastating climatic events requires radical ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We need to move to renewable and safe energy systems. These changes are not only about new policies, new technologies and weighing the costs and risks. They are about tackling the source of the problem. They are about systemic economic and social transformations that move towards new ways of living together within the limits of the planet, ensuring the individual and collective rights of all people.

The journal issue is based partially on papers from a UN expert level conference that looked at the underlying economic and social development shifts that must happen in both the North and the South.¹ They conclude that corporate-driven globalization and neo-liberal economic policies are promoting unsustainable production, consumption and trade. Although in the UN expert setting it could not be spelt out so plainly, the concern is that unsustainable production is leading to a highly unjust situation where the good of the society and the environment is subordinated to corporate profits, and the privatization of the commons and public goods. We are living in a world economy that is based on inequality and poverty and the neo-liberal economic growth model that is fuelling climate change.

It is no longer possible to continue business as usual. Current corporate sponsored 'development' projects such as agrofuels, large-scale hydroelectric dams, monoculture tree plantations, nuclear power, genetically modified seeds and trees are just increasing the vulnerability of people living in poor countries to climate change. Given the present market-led logic that is leading to the privatization of public services, such as water and energy, new technologies are unlikely to the benefit of the majority of the world's people, whatever the accounting done about 'offsetting' the carbon emissions of the very wealthy. Solutions from nanotechnology, carbon capture and storage, carbon trading and offsetting schemes are profoundly questionable from an environmentalist and human rights standpoint, leaving to one side the question of whether they actually work!

Solutions need to come from radically re-aligning North–South relations² in order to reverse resource expropriation, dispossession, exploitation and polluting activities. Industrialized countries must lead the way by committing to binding obligations to cut their greenhouse gas emissions. Adaptation to climate change requires a change in the rules of the game that has so far been skewed to benefit the rich countries of the North. International trade and finance rules need to be revised in order to allow financial transfers from North to South for adaptation and mitigation based on ecological debt, redirecting military budgets and imposing innovative and progressive taxes. Transnational corporations have to be regulated to end their economic and political power and to ensure they follow broader just social and ecological objectives.

We need to live within our ecological limits. This means first and foremost to reduce consumption and end the environmentally degrading lifestyles of the northern and southern elites and shortening production chains to reduce transportation and increase energy efficiency. At the same time, it is critical to restore biodiversity and community control of the commons and to support sustain-

able peasant and family farming and the principles of food sovereignty in order to tackle the growing hunger and poverty in the world. In looking at just solutions we need to be aware of the important role women play in food production and natural resource management. Any mitigation and adaptation activities have to ensure women's participation and address gender divisions in different cultures and societies.

How do we turn the fears about climate change into action for all of us, instead of letting the powers to invent the technologies, launch the policies and count the costs? Can we walk the talk of climate justice? It is a question of justice and of rights; of saying we all need to change our lifestyles and change the rules of the game. Good stewardship of the earth means that we are all accountable for the rising tides, the fragile soils, the drowning and hungry people and the devastated cultures. We need to learn finally that endless growth and endless expansion are not compatible with the laws of nature. Rather than tremble in fear as we despoil our planet and suffer climate 'crisis', we need to put in place a system based on ecological ethics and social justice.

Notes

- 1 The meeting was the UNDP Expert Group Meeting on Integrating Climate Change into National Sustainable Development Strategies Expert Group Meeting held in New York, 12–13 November 2007.
- 2 See the statement Climate Justice Now where environmentalist groups in Bali, December 2007 signed up to a series of commitments that they are fighting for both locally and globally. (<http://climatejustice.blogspot.com/>)