

Kyoto: A False Consensus?
Interview with Larry Lohmann by Heidi Bachram
Red Pepper
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At the UN climate talks in Nairobi, held from 6-17 November 2006, most participants concentrated on defending and refining the embattled Kyoto Protocol. However, a new book co-published by the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation takes a step back to critique the entire neoliberal framework that characterizes the treaty and other carbon trading schemes. Heidi Bachram talks to the book's editor.

Heidi Bachram: Why have you and your colleagues written a book criticising the Kyoto Protocol at a time when Bush is threatening it and countries like Canada are likely to fail to meet its targets?

Larry Lohmann: The debate on climate change is usually presented as one between Kyoto supporters and climate change deniers. But that's not really what it's about. The more important conflict is over who is to own the earth's ability to regulate its climate. From that perspective Bush and carbon trading schemes like Kyoto are on the same side. Both are working to entrench the rights and privileges of big polluters.

HB: What's wrong with carbon trading, in a nutshell?

LL: By allowing the worst polluters to secure huge blocks of pollution rights - and buy still more rights from abroad - carbon trading encourages inaction and blocks innovation. In addition, the measurements of emissions and carbon 'offsets' that are needed can't be made, and global enforcement is impossible. Carbon trading impedes public discussion, and harms communities - mostly in the South - where industry is setting up carbon 'offset' projects to license its own continued pollution.

HB: Is that why so much of the book's research comes from people from the global South?

LL: Yes. In fact, the book's impetus came largely from concerned colleagues in the South who are concerned about the neocolonialist, undemocratic aspects of carbon trading. In India, for example, carbon trading is giving big corporations extra money for continuing to carry out heavily polluting, heavily exploitative activities such as the production of sponge iron, which notoriously takes over and contaminates ordinary farmers' land and forests.

HB: If carbon trading is so damaging, why is it being so heavily promoted?

LL: It benefits business, at least in the short term. It's a story not all that different from many others in the long history of privatisation. For example, how did Thatcherism triumph? Or, going further back, how was common land enclosed in various places? Such movements were long processes of political, legal and technical organisation, which may have started small but got very big.

We've seen a similar thing in climate change. Carbon trading proponents from the US were well organised politically quite early and were able to get their schemes

accepted in the culture and language of the UN. The former secretary general of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Michael Zammit Cutajar, pointed out a couple of years ago that the Kyoto Protocol was 'made in the USA', which is not something a lot of people are aware of. Often people think everybody in the US is opposed to Kyoto, when in reality carbon trading and the Kyoto Protocol were created by US thinkers and US policymakers and backed by a faction of US business.

HB: What do you see as the future for action on climate change?

LL: I think several things are happening at the same time. The first is that carbon trading is collapsing by itself. The market can't do the measurements, it can't create a convincing commodity. Earlier this year the EU carbon market crashed. Governments were handing out so many rights to pollute that the rights didn't have much economic value and the price plummeted.

Then, as local people are hurt more and more by the activities of corporations in their neighbourhoods, who are picking up extra subsidies for business as usual from the carbon market, whether it's biofuel operations or waste gas burning, there's going to be more political resistance. I expect that in the long term, there will also be opposition from the general public once it starts to sink in that carbon trading is not doing the job it's pretending to be doing.

Instead of lavishing ingenuity and resources on fruitless trading schemes, governments need to support communities all over the world that are already following or pioneering low-carbon ways of life. Subsidies need to be shifted away from fossil fuels toward renewables. Public investment needs to be made to change the whole structure of the way industrialized societies use energy. Conventional regulation must also play a big role, as well as taxes. I look forward to a political movement in support of more effective approaches that aim at phasing out fossil fuels and opening up a more democratic discussion about how societies need to be reorganised to cope with the threat of climate change.