

# FACED WITH CLIMATE CRISIS, LOOK TO PEOPLES' SOLUTIONS

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*“To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment indeed, [...] would result in the demolition of society.”*

Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944)<sup>1</sup>

Each year we hear ever more frequent news about rising global temperatures and so-called extreme weather events (floods, hurricanes, droughts etc.). The impact of these events on people is becoming increasingly more obvious, especially in regard to the risk posed to the realization of the human right to adequate food and nutrition.

In the search for solutions, we must recognize that beyond this circumstantial scenario lies a systematic crisis, and thus it is more appropriate to speak of a climate or environmental crisis.

In order to understand the current situation it is vital that we appreciate the role played by the following four factors, developed over the last forty years: the subjugation of the real economy to the financial sphere (financialization); the proliferation of an economistic analysis for all aspects of life; the failure of the ‘Rio Process’; and the financialization of nature as one of the central elements of capital accumulation in the neoliberal era.

In other words, the global economy has become a casino where everything is speculated upon and the interests of the financial sector override the needs of the people.<sup>2</sup> Along with financialization, there is an obvious and urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and loss of biodiversity, and these have now become a profitable business opportunity.

## IT IS THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),

*Anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions have increased since the pre-industrial era, driven largely by economic and population growth, and are now higher than ever. This has led to atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide that are unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. Their effects, together with those of other anthropogenic drivers, have been detected throughout the climate system and are extremely likely to have been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.*<sup>3</sup>

The IPCC also notes that “CO2 emissions from fossil fuel combustion and industrial processes contributed about 78% to the total GHG emission increase between 1970 and 2010. [...] This increase directly came from the energy (47%), industry (30%), transport (11%) and building (3%) sectors”.<sup>4</sup>

A more detailed analysis of such data, prepared by Grain, on how the “industrial food system contributes to the climate crisis”, concludes that this system generates between 44% and 57% of GHG emissions,<sup>5</sup> which raises the urgent need to transform the current system of production, distribution and consumption of food.

What is the role of different countries and regions in the generation of the climate crisis and its impacts? Industrialized countries are historically responsible because they have emitted the vast majority of greenhouse gases,

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### Photo

Woman participating in the D12 protest for climate justice (Paris, France, 2015). Photo by Ronnie Hall.

1 Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation*. 1944.

2 Friends of the Earth International (FoEI). *Nature is Not For Sale*. 2012. Available at: [www.foei.org/resources/publications/publications-by-subject/climate-justice-energy-publications/nature-is-not-for-sale](http://www.foei.org/resources/publications/publications-by-subject/climate-justice-energy-publications/nature-is-not-for-sale).

3 IPCC [Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer, eds]. *Climate Change 2014. Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Geneva: IPCC. p. 4. Available at: [www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR\\_AR5\\_FINAL\\_full.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR_AR5_FINAL_full.pdf).

4 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

5 Grain. *The Great Climate Robbery. How the food system drives climate change and what we can do about it*. 2016. pp. 4–9. Available at: [www.grain.org/article/entries/5354-the-great-climate-robbery](http://www.grain.org/article/entries/5354-the-great-climate-robbery).

creating irreversible damage to global climate patterns.<sup>6</sup> The Kyoto Protocol<sup>7</sup> recognized this with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, which formed the basis of the first commitment period of GHG emissions reduction between 2008 and 2012.

We can therefore say that industrialized countries and domestic elites from the Global South have an ecological debt<sup>8</sup> of a political nature. This is as a result of the existence of both international and class differences in responsibilities in response to the challenge to climate change. It is not by chance that those regions and countries with the highest levels of inequality are also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.<sup>9</sup>

It is crucial to recognize that the economic and demographic growth referred to in the IPCC report is the result of the capitalist model, whose main actors are transnational corporations and their associated domestic elites. This model is based on the use of fossil fuels; the extraction and destruction of natural heritage; large-scale, industrial production methods, mainly oriented to international trade; and increasing consumption patterns.

In other words, the climate crisis we are now experiencing is inextricably linked to the model of production, distribution and consumption, as well as the cultural model and values behind it. Therefore, the climate crisis is also a systemic crisis.

## POLICIES TARGETING THE CLIMATE CRISIS OFFER FALSE SOLUTIONS

Twenty-five years have passed since the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development<sup>10</sup> which was held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil); since then there have been dozens of conferences of parties for the institutions that were created there. Not only have we made no further significant progress on the protection of people's way of life and biodiversity but, on the contrary, climatic imbalances, loss of biodiversity and desertification have accelerated.

In 1992, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established. This institution is where the main commitments and guidelines were agreed upon in terms of adaptation, mitigation and financing. The solutions implemented so far have focused on maintaining existing economic and political structures, while seeking new opportunities for the development of markets and goods. This works in the interests of transnational corporations (TNCs) and their associated domestic elites.

To explain this process, Kosoy and Corbera (2010) propose a three stage process in the commodification of nature: "First, it involved narrowing down an ecological function to the level of an ecosystem service, hence separating the latter from the whole ecosystem. Second, it assigns a single exchange-value to this service and, third, it links 'providers' and 'consumers' of these services in market or market-like exchanges".<sup>11</sup>

Neoliberalism "has unquestionably rolled back the bounds of commodification and greatly extended the reach of legal contracts"<sup>12</sup>—especially short-term contracts—and this logic has had disastrous consequences on the environment;<sup>13</sup> by assuming that, generally, depletion of natural resources is linear. It is not widely known that it is clearly evident that "many ecological systems crash suddenly after they have hit some tipping point beyond which their natural reproduction capacity cannot function".<sup>14</sup>

6 For more information, please see: [unfccc.int/kyoto\\_protocol/items/2830.php](http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php).

7 United Nations. *Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*. 1998. Available at: [unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf](http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf).

8 For more information, please see: Pérez Rincón, Mario Alejandro. Comercio Internacional y Medio Ambiente en Colombia. PhD diss., Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA) Barcelona, 2006. p. 194. Available in Spanish at: [www.tdx.cat/bitstream/handle/10803/4072/mapr1de1.pdf](http://www.tdx.cat/bitstream/handle/10803/4072/mapr1de1.pdf).

9 IPCC, *supra* note 3. p. 57.

10 UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), UN Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC), and UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

11 Kosoy, Nicolás, and Esteve Corbera. "Payments for Ecosystem Services as Commodity Fetishism." *Ecological Economics*, 69 (1): 1229.

12 Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005. p. 166.

13 *Ibid*, p. 172.

14 *Ibid*, p. 174.

- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Grupo Carta de Belém. *Quem ganha e quem perde com o REDD e Pagamento por Serviços Ambientais?* 2001. p. 4. Available in Portuguese at: [br.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/documento\\_redd\\_carta\\_de\\_belem\\_nov\\_2011.pdf](http://br.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/documento_redd_carta_de_belem_nov_2011.pdf).
- 17 Fatheuer, Thomas. *Nueva economía de la naturaleza: Una introducción crítica*. Serie Ecología, vol. 35. México: Fundación Heinrich Böll. 2014. pp. 12–13. Available in Spanish at: [mx.boell.org/es/2014/10/28/nueva-economia-de-la-naturaleza](http://mx.boell.org/es/2014/10/28/nueva-economia-de-la-naturaleza).
- 18 FoEI, *supra* note 2.
- 19 Barbesgaard, Mads. “Blue Carbon: Ocean Grabbing in Disguise?” *Policy Brief Issue* (February 2016). Available at: [www.tni.org/en/publication/blue-carbon-ocean-grabbing-in-disguise](http://www.tni.org/en/publication/blue-carbon-ocean-grabbing-in-disguise).
- 20 For more information on corporate impunity, please see: An Interview with Civil Society. “The Treaty on TNCs and the Struggle to Stop Corporate Impunity.” *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2015): 39–45. Available at: [www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/node/34](http://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/node/34).
- 21 Lang, Chris. “A very different kind of Walt Disney production: Conservation International’s REDD project in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” *WRM Bulletin* No. 169 (August, 2011). Available at: [www.redd-monitor.org/2011/09/02/a-very-different-kind-of-walt-disney-production-conservation-internationals-redd-project-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo/](http://www.redd-monitor.org/2011/09/02/a-very-different-kind-of-walt-disney-production-conservation-internationals-redd-project-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo/).
- 22 FoEI. New report: world’s first big ‘REDD’ project violating indigenous people rights. December 6, 2011. Available at: [www.foei.org/press/archive-by-year/press-2011/new-report-worlds-first-big-redd-project-violating-indigenous-people-rights](http://www.foei.org/press/archive-by-year/press-2011/new-report-worlds-first-big-redd-project-violating-indigenous-people-rights).
- 23 FoEI. *How corporations rule - Part 3: Vale—leading the corporate lobby for easier offsetting and other false ‘green’ solutions*. Amsterdam: FoEI, 2012. Available at: [www.foei.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Vale-Case-for-web-English.pdf](http://www.foei.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Vale-Case-for-web-English.pdf)
- 24 FoEI. *How corporations rule - Part 4: Anglo American’s dirty energy lobby and its false climate solutions*. Amsterdam: TNI, 2014. Available at: [www.tni.org/files/download/17/foei\\_corporate\\_capture\\_report\\_eng\\_mr.pdf](http://www.tni.org/files/download/17/foei_corporate_capture_report_eng_mr.pdf); People’s Summit. Final Declaration of People’s Summit “at Rio+20” for Social and Environmental Justice in defence of the commons, against the commodification of life. Rio de Janeiro, 2012. Available at: [globalforestcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/PeoplesSummit-Final-Declaration-ENG.pdf](http://globalforestcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/PeoplesSummit-Final-Declaration-ENG.pdf); People’s Summit People’s Summit. *Declaration of the People’s Summit on Climate Change*. Lima, 2014. Available in at: <http://climateandcapitalism.com/2015/01/18/peoples-climate-summit-speaks-exploited-oppressed/>.
- 25 For more information, please see the article “Building New Agrifood Systems: Struggles and Challenges” in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.

We are facing a new process of primitive accumulation, which Harvey describes as a “process of accumulation by dispossession”.<sup>15</sup> In practice, this means that people living in those territories become identified as ‘environmental suppliers’ or ‘service providers’, and that has important implications for their way of life and for their identity as political subjects and as standard bearers for a project for alternative societies, recognized socially through their activities and historical struggles. This progress in mechanisms for appropriation of territories has been accompanied by a paralysis in public policies for public access to land<sup>16</sup>—local people being the true guarantors of nature.<sup>17</sup>

There is a presumption that the market is the best way to allocate resources and, in this case, solve environmental and climate problems. This then assumes not only the principle of ‘polluter pays’, but also ‘polluter wins’. Nature and all of its ‘assets’ are now a new and necessary market, which will allow the system to recover from the economic-financial crisis that it has created.<sup>18</sup> This effectively means selling nature to save it.<sup>19</sup> It attempts to resolve the crisis by worsening its causes.

Market mechanisms are a way to sell ‘rights to pollute or to extract’ to companies and, at the same time, increase extractions (usually by the same corporations) in regions that are occupied by traditional communities, using the argument of environmental conservation. Some market mechanisms include: the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD +), Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) and the Blue Carbon Initiative. These various proposals come together under the term ‘green (or blue) economy’ as a supposed attempt to maintain economic growth and ensuring environmental protection. It could be said, therefore, that climate change policies are yet another form of ‘impunity architecture’,<sup>20</sup> to the extent to which they allow corporations to continue to destroy the planet.

In this sense, social movements and organizations refer to the solutions implemented by the UNFCCC as ‘false solutions’. Not only do they fail to highlight the structural causes of the climate crisis, but also, in most cases in which these mechanisms have been implemented, they have generated additional conflict in the territories. For example REDD pilot projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>21</sup> and Indonesia,<sup>22</sup> the choice of *Thyssen-Krupp Companhia Siderúrgica do Atlântico* TKCSA as CDM project in Brazil<sup>23</sup> or the use of compensation mechanisms for biodiversity in coalmines in Colombia.<sup>24</sup>

## THE REAL SOLUTIONS COME FROM THE PEOPLE

Solving the climate crisis requires a true transformation: A transformation that either needs to be systemic or not at all. Public policies that encourage and support the transition to sustainable models of production, distribution and consumption are essential,<sup>25</sup> and they should be implemented with public funds, full transparency and social oversight. To this end, it is critical to reverse the privatization of climate policies, as well as the commodification of nature and life.

There is also a need for a transition that dismantles the architecture of impunity for TNCs and domestic elites. A transition based on solidarity, social justice, environmental and gender rights, respect for the worldview of different peoples, the right to land, water and other territories, including cities. A transition that guarantees the right to education, healthcare, social security and a healthy

environment, built together with the people and against all forms of oppression, whether racial, ethnic, gender or sexual.

A transformation of the energy matrix and the food system is required, contributing to food sovereignty, as called for by La Via Campesina and built upon during the Forum for Food Sovereignty, in Nyéléni in 2007.<sup>26</sup> This called for food systems to be in the hands of the people and at the service of humanity, where small-scale producers (who produce 70–80% of the world’s food) play a crucial role. What’s more, as La Via Campesina and Grain explain, they can “cool the planet”.<sup>27</sup>

This transformation requires women to be considered as subjects with full rights, and work “towards their autonomy and real equity”.<sup>28</sup> To achieve this it is essential to deconstruct patriarchy and eradicate all forms of violence and oppression against women. Additionally, the central role played by women since time immemorial in the development of food systems must be recognized.

“It is rural women, peasants and small-scale food producers, along with consumers who choose agroecological products from local markets, who hold the solution to the climate crisis”,<sup>29</sup> and they are vital for obtaining the human right to adequate food and nutrition.

Ultimately, peoples want to determine the who, what, why and wherefore of the commons, and to take popular control of their productive use.

26 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty. *Synthesis Report*. 2007. Available at: [www.nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/31Mar2007Nyeleni\\_SynthesisReport-en.pdf](http://www.nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/31Mar2007Nyeleni_SynthesisReport-en.pdf).

27 La Via Campesina, and Grain. *Together We can Cool the Planet!* 2016. Available at: [www.grain.org/es/article/entries/5620-comic-book-together-we-can-cool-the-planet](http://www.grain.org/es/article/entries/5620-comic-book-together-we-can-cool-the-planet).

28 For more information, please see the article “From a Market Approach to the Centrality of Life: An Urgent Change for Women” in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.

29 La Via Campesina, and Grain, *supra* note 27.