THIRD WORLD

RESURGENCE

ISSUE No. 358 e-ISSN 2948-4766 www.twn.my

Gloomy weather

How UN talks are failing to deliver on climate change

Third World
RESURGENCE
www.twn.my
No 358 2024/1 e-ISSN 2948-4766


Photo by IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis

The recent UN climate conference in Dubai issued a much-trumpeted call for 'transitioning away from fossil fuels', but such words have so far not been backed up by substantive, equitable action to halt runaway global warming. **9**

THIRD WORLD RESURGENCE is published quarterly by the Third World Network, an independent non-profit international research and advocacy organisation involved in bringing about a greater articulation of the needs, aspirations and rights of the peoples in the South and in promoting just, equitable and ecological development.

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Views expressed in these pages do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Third World Network.

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The harmful harvest of monopoly agriculture

A global agricultural system controlled by a handful of mega-corporations is hurting food producers and consumers alike and ruining the health of people and planet.

Daisy Pearson and Nick Dearden

A Cargill grain storage facility. Cargill is one of the big four agricultural commodity traders that together control up to 90% of the global grain trade.

OUR food system is in crisis. While most people in the world are experiencing a cost-of-living crisis, and small food producers are struggling, the barons of the food industry are enjoying bumper profits. There is a causal link here: the profits of giant and extremely powerful food corporations are deeply interwoven with the crisis for producers and consumers.

Recent figures suggest that well over 50% of recent price rises in the UK, the US and Australia have been driven by increases in profits. A 2023 report from Oxfam states that 'not only are companies passing increased input costs on to consumers, but they are also capitalising on the crisis, using it as a smokescreen to charge even higher prices.' Its research shows a huge increase in the wealth of food and energy billionaires, with 62 'food billionaires' created between 2020 and 2022.

In this period, billionaires in the food and energy sectors saw their combined fortunes increase by a billion dollars every two days. At the same time, 263 million people were at risk of being pushed into extreme poverty, with rises in the price of food a core driver. While our food system is succeeding at funnelling vast wealth into the banks of the super-rich, it is failing to provide the rest of the world with affordable, nutritious food.

These perverse outcomes are just one result of an industry that has become increasingly concentrated, with just a few large companies establishing monopolistic control over entire supply chains. What's increasingly clear is that the behemoths that control the food industry are not earning their crust; they're simply taking it – at whatever cost to people and planet.

The corporate takeover of our food system

Over three decades, there has been a huge concentration in the food industry as the big players have taken over hundreds of smaller companies, part of a broader trend of 'mergers and acquisitions' that has been a dominant feature of the neoliberal economy. While 25 years ago, 10 corporations controlled 40% of the seed market, a series of mega-mergers means that today just four – Bayer, Corteva, Syngenta and BASF – control more than half. Together, they also control more than 60% of the world's agrochemical market. Another area of massive concentration is the trade in agricultural commodities, including grains, meat and sugar, a process dominated by 'the most powerful and least-transparent companies in the industrial food chain'. The top 10 such commodity traders brought in more than half a trillion dollars in 2020. Within that, just four companies – Archer-Daniels-Midland (ADM), Bunge, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus – control 70% of the world market in agricultural commodities.

The problem of monopolisation is just as acute in the world of sales: in an already concentrated sector in the US, a merger currently on the table could see just three supermarkets controlling 70% of the grocery market across 167 cities, even further reducing the range of options available to consumers.

As Krista Brown, policy analyst with the American Economic Liberties Project, put it: ‘We’re at a point in our market concentrations that we haven’t seen ever before.’

This concentration has had some serious consequences for our food system, allowing corporations to squeeze suppliers at one end and consumers at the other, as well as shaping farming practices that damage the environment, entrenching unfair trade systems, and holding back smaller farmers from building more sustainable systems.

You might think that these corporations’ market dominance is rooted in a substantial contribution to global food security, but many of their riches have been accumulated from operations that don’t obviously deserve merit or represent useful forms of productivity. Many of the big agricultural corporations have benefited from unfair trade deals and laws that tilt power in their favour. Some of them have even helped to write those rules themselves. Meanwhile, many of the biggest players, especially commodity traders and supermarkets, have built their wealth from exploiting chokepoints in supply chains, using their power to squeeze producers and fleece customers. In a further move away from actually producing food, agricultural traders increasingly make a large chunk of their money through financial speculation. And as millions of people around the world have found to their cost, this imposing collection of giants is too often failing in its supposed mission to provide nutritious, affordable food to those who need it.

Big agriculture companies are able to push food prices down for farmers, while simultaneously pushing prices up for the public.

Monopolising chokepoints

One way in which big agriculture companies have built immense power in their dealings with both consumers and producers can be understood using the image of an hourglass. With over a billion farmers producing food at one end, and billions of consumers buying it at the other, commodity traders and supermarkets represent a handful of corporations dominating the middle. Cory Doctorow and Rebecca Giblin argue that companies exploit these chokepoints to lock in customers, which in turn locks in suppliers, in a cycle that gives them more and more power over the whole system, while reducing the power, and the income, of everyone else. Given neither producers nor consumers have anywhere else to turn, monopolies are able to push food prices down for farmers, while simultaneously pushing prices up for the public. As one food expert points, out, ‘[a] lot of people are making a huge amount of money out of food, but food producers [only] get about 8% of the £250bn a year we spend on food.’

Buying up the supply chain

Big agriculture companies have also expanded their control by using their immense financial clout to buy up multiple stages of the food value chain, from production through to processing and supply. This gives them the ability to shift resources around in order to maximise their own profits and crush smaller businesses, reducing the choices for both suppliers and consumers.

An example is soy production in Brazil, where Cargill, ADM and Bunge not only provide over 60% of the total financing, they also supply the seed, fertiliser and agrochemicals to the farmers, and manage the purchase, storage and transport of the harvested soy in their own facilities and infrastructure. It also undermines local economies: slowing the circulation of money among smaller businesses, and increasingly funnelling it into the bank accounts of these large corporations. Further, the crushing of smaller farmers and suppliers also limits diversity of production, a process which ultimately leads to higher prices.

This broader process of concentration means food giants don’t have to fear being outcompeted, leaving them with outsized power to set prices – this can in turn drive inflation. In fact, during 2022, the profits of food and commodities giants ADM and Bunge rose much faster than the inflation fuelled by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While the system's defenders argue that food companies were simply accounting for increased costs across the supply chain, the bottom line of these companies told a different story. The biggest corporations are marking up their prices twice as much, on average, as smaller companies, ripping off consumers, workers and citizens while suffocating smaller companies. In 2022, the profits of food and energy companies more than doubled.

Speculation

The outsized influence of these companies has had other perverse consequences too; for instance, some food corporations have become major speculators on financial markets, increasingly making money not from actually producing anything to eat, but gambling on food prices – a process which can itself increase costs. In 2008, when food prices spiked dramatically and millions were plunged into hunger, financial speculation was considered a significant factor. Then, in 2022 when food prices again went through the roof, researchers at Manchester University argued that increases in financial speculation

The Cargill chronicle

'WE are the flour in your bread, the wheat in your noodles, the salt on your fries. We are the corn in your tortillas, the chocolate in your dessert, the sweetener in your soft drink. We are the oil in your salad dressing and the beef, pork or chicken you eat for dinner. We are the cotton in your clothing, the backing on your carpet and the fertiliser in your field.'
— Cargill brochure

Cargill is the largest privately owned company in the US, with sales of $134 billion in 2020, 155,000 employees and a presence in over 70 countries. The company's exact reach is almost impossible to measure, but it has penetrated nearly every possible aspect of the global food supply chain, from farm to table. Despite its enormous size and pervasiveness, and numerous scandals and controversies, it remains relatively unknown. In total, 88% of the company is owned by one family, which includes 12 billionaires, making them the fourth-richest family in the US. Private ownership allows the company to remain shrouded in secrecy, with high levels of control over how much information it shares publicly. You can't boycott something you can't see.

Cargill's ascendancy has been marked by many of the usual tactics of monopolists. Founded in 1865 with a single grain flat house in Iowa, the business quickly expanded. Cargill exploited a very early chokepoint: since it was often the only grain elevator at major train stations, it could force farmers, who had no other option, to pay high prices, which were sometimes fixed in backroom deals. Quickly buying up multiple stages of the supply chain (in the tactic known as vertical integration), from farms to storage and transportation, Cargill was able to cut costs and further increase profits.

Cargill continued to expand aggressively, exploiting the turbulence of the first half of the 20th century to profit even while many people suffered in wars and crises. It raked in huge profits from high and fluctuating grain prices during World War I, and was accused of profiteering. Then, in the 1930s, while the Dust Bowl was destroying crops and pushing thousands of farming families into poverty, the corporation was accused of trying to corner the grain market, and was banned from the Chicago Board of Trade. Despite this, the company continued to expand, especially during World War II, where its move into shipbuilding and transportation gained it valuable government contracts and further solidified its sector dominance. Between 1955 and 1965, the company's US grain exports increased by 400%.

Cargill, and the other big commodity traders, have fundamentally shaped the global food system we know today. The four largest agricultural commodity traders, one of which is Cargill, today control huge portions of the trade in basic commodities, including up to 90% of the global grain trade. Present at every stage in the global food supply chain, from supplying seeds and fertilisers, to processing food in a myriad of different ways, to transportation and storage, these firms have fundamentally transformed the global food production system into the complex, globalised and financialised business we see today.

In an interview with Greenpeace, Glenn Hurowitz from the environmental organisation Mighty Earth said, 'It used to be that if you were buying a chicken or some beef, you'd get it from farms within a hundred miles of your city. Now the meat and the feed can be shipped thousands of miles, with no visibility of how it's made … Cargill has built the modern agriculture system – with all its abuses.'

At the same time as shaping the global food system, these corporations have written their agricultural vision (and their power) into the very rules of the modern economy. When global trade rules (GATT) were being renegotiated in the 1980s (for the first time since they were originally written after World War II), it was Dan Amstutz, former Cargill Vice-President, who wrote the original draft of the Agreement on Agriculture. His draft included proposals such as prohibiting countries from establishing any import controls or regulations, banning all export controls, even in times of food shortages in a country, and restricting countries from enforcing strict food safety laws. Not all of his proposals made it into the final draft, but the agreement was still markedly biased towards corporate interests, with huge tax breaks for corporations, and a deeply unequal subsidy system, which heavily favoured Global North industry over the Global South even in times of food insecurity in poor countries, all of which resulted in record low returns for farmers across the world. Ultimately this deal spelled disaster for small family farms, while corporations raked in the profits.

Cargill has continued its tradition

in the years leading up to the crisis likely contributed.

Unfair trade

This consolidation of agricultural monopolies has been an intensely political process, spurred on by the relentless drive of corporations to corner ever-greater sections of the food market, but aided by policies that have tilted the balance of power away from local economies and towards agricultural behemoths.

Neoliberal free trade agreements across the 1980s and 1990s favoured Global North agriculture and big business, with uneven rules on subsidising that overall allow rich countries to give far more support to their farming industries than poor countries. Big agriculture company associates have even been involved in writing some of these international agreements (see box). These trade deals allowed heavy subsidisation of agriculture in the Global North, which led firms, especially in the US, to produce huge surpluses of food. Much of this was exported far below the cost of production. Meanwhile, Global South countries were forced to slash import tariffs, leading to the mass dumping of cheap Global North food on Global South countries. This decimated domestic Global South food markets across many sectors while bolstering forms of industrial farming.

Once almost self-sufficient in rice production, Haiti was forced to cut import tariffs on rice from 50% to 3% in less than two years from 1994–95 if it wanted to participate in the global market. Meanwhile, the US government was heavily subsidising its own rice industry – in 2003 it provided $1.3 billion in subsidies, a whopping 72% of the total cost of production. As a result, Haiti was flooded with US rice and Haitian rice production was destroyed, along with hundreds of thousands of jobs. Up to 2023, Haiti was still importing 80% of its rice, while global rice prices have gone through the roof. In this context, 44% of Haiti's population faces acute food insecurity, which is the fourth-highest per capita figure in the world.

Intellectual property

Similarly, the drive by the US to establish globally enforceable intellectual property rights encourages agricultural companies to expand their ownership over ever-greater swathes of the food chain. Long resisted by peasants' groups like Via Campesina, who argue that natural resources should not be privatised, this move allowed big agriculture firms to slap patents on seeds. Driven on by the big four seed companies, this approach is increasingly pervasive. Over the past few decades, big agribusiness companies have also been pushing for farmers to adopt genetically modified (GM) seeds, with worrying effects.

In India, where Monsanto (bought up by Bayer in 2018 as concentration in the market deepened even further) controlled 90% of the cotton seed market, small-scale farmers have been at the sharp end of Monsanto's activities. Unlike farmers' own seeds which can be saved and swapped freely, Monsanto's GM cotton seeds are patented, which means farmers have to buy them every year. At a cost of up to four times more than traditional varieties, this increases farmers' costs considerably, creating indebtedness and threatening livelihoods.

Further, the GM crops pushed by big agriculture firms are often designed to withstand increased use of specific herbicides. Inevitably, this means more chemicals and more products that farmers must buy from the companies like Bayer. In some cases, this has led to the growth of herbicide-resistant weeds that require ever-more toxic chemicals to kill. As well as contaminating water, soil and air, heavy pesticide use is a huge driver of biodiversity loss, at a time when we're experiencing the sixth mass extinction event: a human-led biodiversity crisis.

Damaging the health of people and planet

The industrial forms of farming that secure huge profits for the big agrochemical companies

of crisis profiteering. During the global COVID pandemic, against the backdrop of millions of deaths, crop failures and a global hunger crisis that saw nearly a billion people going hungry, Cargill announced the biggest profits in its 156-year history, up 64% on the previous year. As a result, the Cargill family, already rich, welcomed four new billionaires to their ranks, making a total of 12.

Cargill's mission to make profits at all costs means its entire history is littered with scandals and controversies, from fatal meat contaminations, to deforestation, toxic waste dumping, pollution of water, air and land, accusations of child labour in its supply chains, price fixing, union busting, and lying about its emissions. What's more, it has used and abused its incredible size, market share and influence over political power to ride roughshod over the environment, workers and consumers. A systematic offender, Cargill has been ordered to pay over $220 million in penalties since 2000 alone, with the biggest offences being environmental violation and price-fixing or anti-competitive practices. Over 200 offences to its name since 2000 suggest that fines are not a sufficient disincentive to prevent Cargill from continuing to flout regulations.

And while Cargill claims to acknowledge the urgent 'need to make our food system more sustainable and resilient', in 2017 Mighty Earth revealed Cargill to be one of the two largest customers of industrial-scale deforestation. Further research by Greenpeace and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has implicated the corporation in massive deforestation in Brazil's crucial Cerrado region.

have had disastrous effects on our health, the conditions of workers and the environment. The heavy use of pesticides is linked to many chronic illnesses in humans, such as cancer, and heart, respiratory and neurological diseases. In perhaps the most high-profile case, Monsanto has faced tens of thousands of legal claims that its Roundup herbicide caused people's cancer, with the company's new owners Bayer settling cases to the tune of over $10 billion.

Not only does the model pushed by monopoly agriculture corporations run on chemicals, but it contributes to climate change too, with this model of farming relying heavily on fossil-fuel-based fertilisers. Between a quarter and a third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from food, and emissions from agriculture are on the rise, having increased by more than 20% since 1990.

The trends driven by these giants of agriculture have also made our food system more vulnerable. It is estimated that around 75% of plant genetic diversity has been lost since the 1990s as farmers are encouraged to cultivate genetically similar high-yielding crops. Around three-quarters of the food we consume now comes from only 12 plant and five animal species. This monocultural approach is dangerous, leaving us far more vulnerable to climate change or crop disease.

Digital domination to come?

The food industry has never been so concentrated in the hands of so few corporations, and these huge companies are now eyeing the next big frontier to help them consolidate their power: the digital economy. It's now possible to collect increasing amounts of data on farms – whether through advanced sensors on digital tractors or through simpler recordings on mobile phones – and this data could prove extremely lucrative.

Big agriculture companies have swarmed to take up the technology, with companies like Bayer having created or bought apps which they say will 'help' farmers 'take decisions on what to plant, how much to spray, [and] when to harvest'. Some of these companies market their apps as ways of helping farmers to be more 'climate smart', including through more precise use of chemical inputs and water. In almost every case, this means farmers have to give up their agricultural knowledge about a whole range of issues, including soil fertility and crops. Inevitably, these apps heavily encourage farmers to buy tools and inputs from the same agricultural giants that control the app.

Such technologies generate vast amounts of data, which will only set these agricultural giants even further apart from their smaller competitors. IT for Change argues that these firms benefit not only from a 'constant flow of profitable data and a bigger and better dataset, but also the emergence of a systemic dependency [on their services]'.

While data technology may have a role to play in responding to climate and environmental crises, it's worth remembering that Big Agriculture created many of the problems they are now claiming to solve. Understandably, there is huge scepticism around the 'precision' advice provided by the firms now hoovering up masses of data. Will an industry that makes its money from selling huge quantities of chemical inputs really prioritise what's best for farmers and their fields?

The system isn't working

Interviewed in 2021 about claims that Cargill's recent mega acquisition of Sanderson Farms had contributed to poultry price rises of 30%, Dave MacLennan, chairman and CEO of Cargill, responded, 'You can't have a bunch of small players delivering such an important food source to the nation's consumers. You have to have larger companies that can do it cheaply and can keep costs down.'

Even aside from this being a bizarre response to the question, given his company appeared to have just sent prices rocketing, the broader argument is clearly untrue: a system driven by monopoly corporations is not delivering food to the people who need it, nor is it helping to keep prices down.

Food prices have instead risen with the profits of the megarich, and the people who most need food aren't getting it. Just as the number of people using food banks surged in the UK and globally 735 million people faced hunger in 2022, the profits of big agriculture companies skyrocketed.

We are allowing a handful of companies an unprecedented level of illegitimate and private control over one of our most fundamental resources for survival. Huge corporations make the decisions about everything we eat – what we eat and what is grown, and where, and by whom. Decisions that should be democratic, open and transparent are being made by corporations who have proved time and time again that they value profits over people and planet, that they're willing to break the law, cut corners and exploit crises for their own gain.

A food system run by monopolists isn't working. It's time to build something new. ◆

Daisy Pearson and Nick Dearden are with Global Justice Now, a democratic social justice organisation working as part of a global movement to challenge the powerful and create a more just and equal world. The above was first released as a supplementary briefing to the report Taken, Not Earned: How Monopolists Drive the World's Power and Wealth Divide, *published by the Balanced Economy Project, SOMO, Global Justice Now and LobbyControl. Both the report and the briefing (with references) are available at www.globaljustice.org.uk.*

Davos elites talk about rebuilding trust. The people talk of system change

While the yearly Davos confab of the rich and powerful discusses pallid prescriptions for the world's ills, people on the sharp end of inequality are demanding altogether more radical change.

Jenny Ricks

World Economic Forum/Ciaran McCrickard (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

At the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos in January.

WITH war threatening to escalate in the Middle East, as well as crises in Ecuador and many other parts of the world, most people were not even aware that the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, rolled around again in January. In the context of sharpening inequalities and perilous global politics, what relevance does this gathering have outside the elite bubble?

The Forum's annual *Global Risks Report* itself posits misinformation, societal polarisation, extreme weather conditions, conflict and rising cost of living among the key risks to the global economy this year. What the WEF has failed to define is that for many, the coming year does not bring the threat of multiple crises. Those crises are already here, and are being lived daily on the streets and in the homes of people on the frontlines of inequality around the world. But we did not seriously expect a self-selecting gathering of the elite to be in touch with that lived reality.

In many ways, the multilateralism that the WEF wishes to (but can only in a de facto way) be a part of has never looked more in peril. The United Nations system is impotent as members fail to enforce the international rule of law on Israel and its allies in the United States. This blatant revealing of how the international system currently works for the rich and powerful is seen and understood by many, including a disenfranchised younger generation.

The spectre of protests across the world on the streets in support of a ceasefire in Gaza and Palestinian liberation is the power of people on display. It is not hard to imagine that the same people power that will free Palestine will free the world from neoliberalism.

Every January during Davos, our allies at Oxfam release jaw-dropping statistics about inequality (see box next page). They always do a great job of crystallising for us the depth of the mess we're in and provide a wedge into what sits beneath – the wider, systemic and intersectional problem. But statistics can only hold up a mirror. They do not change the picture we see staring back at us.

For people living on the frontlines of inequality across the world, change is in short supply. We've won the debates on how bad inequality is and the fact that it requires deep change. Leaders in the WEF, the International Monetary Fund, many national governments, and even the Pope say they agree things need to change. But in practice, we are far from agreement with the rich and powerful about what change needs to happen and who should be driving that change.

Davos elites talk about

rebuilding trust. The people talk of system change.

So where is the change going to come from? Inequality is, at heart, an issue of power. We in the Fight Inequality Alliance know that change comes when people power becomes stronger than those driving and benefiting from the status quo. People are already gathering in different formations and expressing their strong displeasure about the current state of affairs, which is built to oppress the majority in favour of a few.

People around the world are already actively campaigning for the policy prescriptions that would do the most to ensure societies that work for all. The agenda of taxing the richest people and multinationals more, adequately funding public services, cancelling the debt, and providing decent work for all have been the backbone of struggles for a just and equitable world for many years. Charting a path to an economy which puts people and planet ahead of greed and profit is the course to take to answer the dangerous times we are in.

Collective power

But given the intense concentration of power and wealth in so few hands across the globe, the dangerous sweep of right-wing extremism, sexism, austerity, misogyny and discrimination, accompanied by a crackdown on democratic rights and freedoms, these struggles need to join up and build collective power on a larger scale. With over 50 national elections set across a hugely diverse range of countries from India to South Africa, the UK to the United States, representing over half of humanity's population, this year will be a test for democracy. What kind of societies are we able to fight for?

The reality on the streets as the World Economic Forum met in the Davos mountains is totally disconnected. People cannot and will not ask Davos to solve their problems. How can trust be rebuilt in a system that is designed to exploit and extract from the majority of humanity? Any talk of rebuilding trust must surely sound as hollow to those at the sharp end of oppression, injustice and inequality.

But protestors know that all is not lost. We believe in ourselves, and that change will come. Glimmers of hope appear when people organise themselves and demand progressive change – and governments are forced to respond. We have seen moves towards wealth taxes in Mexico and Zimbabwe, to name recent examples. In Latin America and the Caribbean, a groundbreaking summit between governments led to a new direction for more progressive taxation and for the region to raise a united voice on the international tax reform process. The expectation and the demand for fairer and more just societies drives us forward. We can never give that up.

Listen to those on the streets. Their stories and demands are our greatest hope. ◆

Jenny Ricks is the Global Convenor of the Fight Inequality Alliance. This article is reproduced from Inequality.org under a Creative Commons licence.

Our unequal world

- Since 2020, the five richest men in the world have seen their fortunes more than double, while almost five billion people have seen their wealth fall.
- If each of the five wealthiest men were to spend $1 million a day, it would take 476 years to exhaust their combined wealth.
- Seven out of 10 of the world's biggest corporations have a billionaire CEO or a billionaire as their principal shareholder.
- Globally, men own $105 trillion more wealth than women.
- The world's richest 1% own 43% of all global financial assets.
- The richest 1% emit as much carbon pollution as the poorest two-thirds of humanity.
- In the US, the wealth of a typical Black household is just 15.8% of that of a typical white household. In Brazil, on average, white people have incomes more than 70% higher than those of Afro-descendants.
- Just 0.4% of over 1,600 of the world's largest and most influential companies are publicly committed to paying their workers a living wage and support payment of a living wage in their value chains.
- It would take 1,200 years for a female worker in the health and social sector to earn what a CEO in the biggest Fortune 100 companies earns on average in one year.

Source: 'Inequality Inc.' Oxfam Briefing Paper (January 2024). www.oxfam.org/en/research/inequality-inc

Mixed reactions of elation and frustration

An overview of the Dubai climate outcomes

The COP 28 United Nations climate conference in Dubai, UAE, on 30 November–13 December brought together representatives of governments which are Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Paris Agreement. *Meena Raman* runs the rule over the major outcomes from the meeting – including a headline decision that doesn't quite live up to its attendant fanfare – and what they entail for the effort to save an overheating planet.

THE reactions to the outcomes of the Dubai climate talks were mixed. While some celebrated the first-time, historic mention of 'transitioning away from fossil fuels' in the decision adopted on the first global stocktake (GST), others expressed despair and frustration.

The small island developing states criticised the outcome as not going far enough in ambition, while other developing countries lamented the lack of equity in the decision, as it did not call on developed countries to take the lead in moving away from fossil fuels and with urgency. They were also disappointed that the means of implementation for their transition remain unfulfilled.

The hypocrisy of the developed world was most visible when it was clear that their expressions of elation over the Dubai decision were not matched by their actions on the ground. Instead of 'transitioning away from fossil fuels', developed countries in fact have plans for fossil fuel expansion up to 2050.

Bolivia chastised developed countries 'who talked a lot about keeping the 1.5°C temperature limit alive and about this goal being the "North Star"', when they 'have plans to expand fossil fuels until 2050, and are going against the very science that they have been talking about'. Bolivia called this 'carbon colonialism'.


Photo by IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis

COP 28 delegates celebrating the adoption of the 'global stocktake' decision at the conference. The decision included mention of 'transitioning away from fossil fuels' – the first time such a call has been made in the UN climate negotiations.

Bolivia's assertions were supported by a recent report by Oil Change International (OCI),[1] which showed that the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway and the United Kingdom account for 51% of the planned expansion from new oil and gas fields through 2050. Four of these countries, excluding Norway, are amongst the top 10 historical contributors to the climate crisis based on their domestic emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases (GHGs) since the industrial era.

According to the OCI report, the US emerges as the worst culprit by far, accounting on its own for more than 37% or about one-third of the planned expansion, followed by Canada and Russia. In 2023 alone, the US administration approved the Alaska Willow Project; approved multiple liquefied natural gas (LNG) export facilities in Alaska and along the Gulf Coast; held a massive oil and gas lease sale in the Gulf of Mexico; fast-tracked the Mountain Valley Pipeline; and oversaw the weakening of environmental laws, making it easier for fossil fuel infrastructure to move forward. (See the article 'Fossil fuel phase-out – hype and hypocrisy' in this issue.)

Such actions are all antithetical to the professed claims of being ambitious in climate efforts.

The 1.5°C fallacy

The objective of the GST under the Paris Agreement (PA) is to conduct a periodic assessment of the collective progress of PA Parties towards achieving the accord's purpose and its long-term goals. 2023 was set to be the first year for this, hence its significance.

The Dubai decision on the GST, adopted by the fifth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 5), was part of a package of decisions hailed as the 'UAE Consensus'. It was gavelled very quickly by COP 28 President, Dr Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, on 13 December morning to a jubilant crowd in the plenary. (The conference overran its initial scheduled closure on 12 December.)

An elated Al Jaber said that all Parties 'worked very hard to secure a better future for people and our planet', calling the decision 'our historic achievement, which we should be proud of'. He said the decision was a 'comprehensive response' with all the other adopted decisions, and that 'we have confronted the reality and set the world in a right direction to keep the 1.5°C [limit on temperature rise] within reach, led by science'. He also said that an agreement was only as good as its implementation, and called on Parties to take the necessary steps.

Several climate experts and observers, including the Third World Network, have questioned the over-enthusiastic response of the COP 28 President and others who have praised the Dubai outcomes.

The decision adopted on the global mitigation efforts does not go far enough in keeping the 1.5°C limit within reach, as developed countries are not undertaking their fair share of emissions reductions today, including through halting the expansion of fossil fuel production with urgency.

An oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico. The US, which held a massive oil and gas lease sale in the Gulf of Mexico in 2023, accounts for over a third of planned expansion from new oil and gas fields through 2050.

With the plans for expansion of fossil fuels by several historical emitters up to 2050, the remaining 'carbon budget' to limit global warming to 1.5°C is likely to be busted very soon. As the 6th Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reveals, there is a carbon budget of only 500 gigatonnes left, and with current emission trends, this remaining carbon budget will be exhausted in this decade.

As pointed out by Indian experts, the focus of the mitigation efforts should have been on how the remaining carbon budget is distributed among countries, based on equity and the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities' (CBDR-RC) between developed and developing countries, taking into account the historical and cumulative emissions of the former. (See the article 'Sharing the carbon budget' in this issue.)

This notion of fair shares in mitigation efforts has been advanced by climate justice movements as well as developing countries such as Bolivia, India, China and others, but has been ignored due to the resistance of developed countries. The rich world sees this as a top-down approach that dictates how much countries must do, rather than leaving it to a bottom-up process such as the 'nationally determined contributions' (NDCs) under the PA, with the latter being championed especially by the US.

COP 28 and CMA 5 also saw the adoption of other key decisions, which however did not quite make it to the limelight like the decision on fossil fuel transition.

Loss and damage fund

The decision on operationalising the loss and damage fund was adopted at the opening of the climate talks on 30 November. This move by the COP 28 President to have the decision adopted on the first day of the conference was unprecedented, clearly designed to start the COP on a very positive note, just ahead of the 'World Climate Action Summit' that was held on 1 December. The Summit saw the convergence of over 100 world leaders in Dubai, with many calling for more climate action.

The decision on the loss and damage fund is indeed significant, given the intense and difficult negotiations which preceded it. Al Jaber said, after the adoption of the decision, 'We have delivered history today. The first time a decision has been adopted on day one of any COP. The speed in which we have done so is also unique, phenomenal, and historic … Getting this done demonstrates the hard work of so many … who worked so hard to get us to this point. This is evidence that we can deliver. COP 28 can and will deliver.'

The decision was adopted without naming the fund but Al Jaber recommended that the board of the fund (once it is formed) would 'take up the matter of a name for this fund for climate impact response.'

There was applause in the plenary hall which was followed by several countries pledging money to the fund, which initially totalled about $300 million, with the UAE and Germany announcing $100 million each. The pledges now amount to around $700 million, with the United States pledging a rather disappointing amount of $17.5 million, which is also subject to approval by its Congress.

The GST decision

In the GST process, developing countries had wanted, among other things:

- Recognition of the overuse of the carbon budget by developed countries and their historical responsibility;
- Recognition of the pre-2020 implementation gaps (since the PA only addresses post-2020 obligations) primarily due to developed countries not meeting their obligations;
- Recognition of the principles of equity and CBDR-RC between developed and developing countries;
- Fossil fuel phase-out to be just and equitable, with developed countries taking the lead and with developing countries being provided with the means of implementation to do so.

What was finally agreed in respect of the above was as follows:

- On historical emissions and link to the global carbon budget, the GST decision (in paragraph 25) states: 'Expresses concern that the carbon budget consistent with achieving the PA temperature goal is now small and being rapidly depleted and acknowledges that historical cumulative net carbon dioxide emissions already account for about four fifths of the total carbon budget for a 50 per cent probability of limiting global warming to 1.5°C'. This falls short of placing responsibility on developed countries for using up most of the global carbon budget in relation to the temperature goal.
- On the pre-2020 gaps, paragraph 17 of the decision reads, 'Notes with concern the pre-2020 gaps in both mitigation ambition and implementation by developed country Parties and that the IPCC had earlier indicated that developed countries must reduce emissions by 25-40 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020, which was not achieved'. This is an important acknowledgement of the non-achievement by developed countries of their obligations.
- There are explicit references to the Convention and principles of equity and CBDR-RC in the preambular section of the decision and in a section related to 'cross-cutting considerations'. However, the text has largely been toned down from earlier iterations, mainly due to opposition from developed countries, who had wanted minimal or no reference to the Convention, its principles or differentiation between developed and developing countries.

Renewable energy, fossil fuels, methane

The most focused outcome of the GST decision was in paragraphs 28 and 29, which read:

'28. …recognises the need for deep, rapid and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in line with 1.5°C pathways and calls on Parties to contribute to the following global efforts, in a nationally determined manner, taking into account the Paris Agreement and their different national circumstances, pathways and approaches:

(a) Tripling renewable energy capacity globally and doubling the global average annual rate of energy efficiency improvements by 2030;

(b) Accelerating efforts towards the phase-down of unabated coal power;

(c) Accelerating efforts globally towards net zero emission energy systems, utilising zero- and low-carbon fuels well before or by around mid-century;

(d) Transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science;

(e) Accelerating zero- and low-emission technologies, including, inter alia, renewables, nuclear, abatement and removal technologies such as carbon capture and utilisation and storage, particularly in hard-to-abate sectors, and low-carbon hydrogen production;

(f) Accelerating and substantially reducing non-carbon-dioxide emissions globally, including in particular methane emissions by 2030;

(g) Accelerating the reduction of emissions from road transport on a range of pathways, including through development of infrastructure and rapid deployment of zero- and low-emission vehicles;

(h) Phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that do not address energy poverty or just transitions, as soon as possible;

29. Recognises that transitional fuels can play a role in facilitating the energy transition while ensuring energy security'.

The decision does not mention 'phase-out' of fossil fuels but 'transitioning away' from them. Much ado has been made over this, but it appears to be more an issue of semantics than substance. However, not all fossil fuels are included here, as paragraph 29 allows for the role of 'transitional fuels' in the energy transition, which is seen to mean natural gas. Many view this as a major loophole.

Every country can decide according to its national circumstances what it will do in relation to the mitigation efforts above. Although the text here does not say that developed countries should take the lead and that the means of implementation are to be provided to developing countries, developing countries will insist, given that the Paris Agreement has to be taken into account, that this is the understanding that must be followed as per the Agreement.

A major issue however is exactly how 'just, orderly and equitable' transition away from fossil fuels is going to be determined and implemented, when every country will determine what it can do according to its own national circumstances. The same goes for how the other global mitigation efforts are going to be realised, given the national determination of such efforts. This is going to be a complicated issue.

Grave concerns have also been expressed over the technology solutions that should be accelerated, including nuclear and removal and abatement technologies such as carbon capture, utilisation and storage.

Photo by IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis

Participants walking past a billboard outside the COP 28 venue. The COP 28 decision on global mitigation efforts does not go far enough in keeping the 1.5°C global warming limit within reach, as developed countries are not undertaking their fair share of emissions reductions.

Speaking after the adoption of the GST decision, the representative of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) said that 'the course correction needed has not been secured' and that 'we have made incremental advancement over business as usual' but 'what is needed is an exponential step change'.

AOSIS noted that there is no commitment to peak emissions by 2025, saying that the science cannot be ignored in this regard. Many other developing countries could not agree to a target of peaking emissions by 2025, due to the enormous challenge this would entail for them.

In relation to paragraph 28 of the text, AOSIS said 'the exclusive focus on energy systems is disappointing' and that sub-paragraphs (e) (on zero- and low-emission technologies) and (h) (on phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies) 'potentially take us backward rather than forward' and 'we are being asked to endorse technologies that could result in actions that undermine our efforts'. It called for guardrails on this language (which could not be included as the decision had already been gavelled).

Colombia said that the commitment to transition away from fossil fuels is important but there are loopholes in the decision which also have risks, adding that transition fuels (such as natural gas) will end up colonising the space of the decarbonisation.

In fact, Colombian Environment Minister Susana Muhamed had, earlier in the Dubai conference on 10 December, highlighted the challenges for developing countries when she said that 'a new economic order that would help guide the economic and energy transition is required for addressing the challenge of climate change'. Addressing the challenges of transitioning away from fossil fuels, Muhamed shared the difficulties her country has faced in dealing with its own transition away from oil. She underlined the need for aligning the economic and financial system to this transition. (See the article 'Fossil fuel phase-out in developing countries requires new economic order' in this issue.)

Antigua and Barbuda said that reliance on transition gas is a dangerous loophole and that it is a fossil fuel that we need to transition away from. It raised alarm that this will take away investments from renewable energy, leaving poor developing countries with high energy costs and stranded assets.

Halting deforestation by 2030

Another important outcome from the GST decision is the first-time mention of halting and reversing deforestation by 2030. Paragraph 33 'emphasises the importance of conserving, protecting and restoring nature and ecosystems', including through 'enhanced efforts towards halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation by 2030, and other terrestrial and marine ecosystems acting as sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases and by conserving biodiversity, while ensuring social and environmental safeguards, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework'.

Concerns have however been raised by some developing countries as to how this is to be achieved if there are no financial resources to halt and reverse deforestation.

Global goal on adaptation

While the GST decision and its provisions on mitigation efforts took most of the limelight at Dubai, less attention was paid to the decision on the global goal on adaptation (GGA). Governments had struggled to find consensus on the GGA framework, which meant that the final draft text from the COP 28 Presidency came only hours before the closing plenary, where the decision was finally adopted.

The GGA decision is significant as it gives a major thrust to the importance of adaptation from a global perspective.

Parties agreed to adopt 'the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience' and decided that its purpose 'is to guide the achievement of the GGA and the review of overall progress in achieving it with a view to reducing the increasing adverse impacts, risks and vulnerabilities associated with climate change, as well as to enhance adaptation action and support.'

It was also decided that the Framework 'should guide and strengthen efforts, including long-term transformational and incremental adaptation, towards reducing vulnerability and enhancing adaptive capacity and resilience, as well as the collective well-being of all people, the protection of livelihoods and economies, and the preservation and regeneration of nature, for current and future generations.'

Governments are urged 'to increase ambition and enhance adaptation action and support, in order to accelerate swift action at scale and at all levels, from local to global, in alignment with other global frameworks, towards the achievement of, inter alia, the following targets by 2030, and progressively beyond:

(a) Significantly reducing climate-induced water scarcity and enhancing climate resilience to water-related hazards towards a climate-resilient water supply, climate-resilient sanitation and towards access to safe and affordable potable water for all;

(b) Attaining climate-resilient food and agricultural production and supply and distribution of food, as well as increasing sustainable and regenerative production and equitable access to adequate food and nutrition for all;

(c) Attaining resilience against climate change related health impacts, promoting climate-resilient health services, and significantly reducing climate-related morbidity and mortality, particularly in the most vulnerable communities;

(d) Reducing climate impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity, and accelerating the use of ecosystem-based adaptation and nature-based solutions, including through their management, enhancement, restoration and conservation and the protection of terrestrial, inland water, mountain, marine and coastal ecosystems;

(e) Increasing the resilience of infrastructure and human settlements to climate change impacts to ensure basic and continuous essential services for all, and minimising climate-related impacts on infrastructure and human settlements;

(f) Substantially reducing the adverse effects of climate change on poverty eradication and livelihoods, in particular by promoting the use of adaptive social protection measures for all;

(g) Protecting cultural heritage from the impacts of climate-related risks by developing adaptive strategies for preserving cultural practices and heritage sites and by designing climate-resilient infrastructure, guided by traditional knowledge, Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and local knowledge systems'.

The following targets in relation to 'the dimensions of the iterative adaptation cycle, recognising the need to enhance adaptation action and support', were also agreed to:

'(a) Impact, vulnerability and risk assessment: by 2030 all Parties have conducted up-to-date assessments of climate hazards, climate change impacts and exposure to risks and vulnerabilities and have used the outcomes of these assessments to inform their formulation of national adaptation plans, policy instruments, and planning processes and/or strategies, and by 2027 all Parties have established multi-hazard early warning systems, climate information services for risk reduction and systematic observation to support improved climate-related data, information and services;

(b) Planning: by 2030 all Parties have in place country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory and fully transparent national adaptation plans, policy instruments, and planning processes and/or strategies, covering, as appropriate, ecosystems, sectors, people and vulnerable communities, and have mainstreamed adaptation in all relevant strategies and plans;

(c) Implementation: by 2030 all Parties have progressed in implementing their national adaptation plans, policies and strategies and, as a result, have reduced the social and economic impacts of the key climate hazards identified in the assessments referred to in paragraph 10(a) above;

(d) Monitoring, evaluation and learning: by 2030 all Parties have designed, established and operationalised a system for monitoring, evaluation and learning for their national adaptation efforts and have built the required institutional capacity to fully implement the system'.

The efforts to realise the above targets are to 'be made in a manner that is country-driven, voluntary and in accordance with national circumstances; take into account sustainable development and poverty eradication; and not constitute a basis for comparison between Parties'.

Developing countries had also called for stronger language on adaptation finance and means of implementation that would require developed countries to scale up their contributions to developing countries in order to enable the latter to undertake adaptation efforts in response to the worsening impacts of climate change. Developed countries were resistant to this but the strong show of unity in the G77 and China developing-country bloc ensured strong language on the need to provide means of implementation.

The most notable was in paragraph 32 of the GGA decision text: 'Recognises that the extent to which the framework for the GGA is implemented by developing country Parties depends on, inter alia, engagement and action at all levels, and the effective implementation by developed country Parties of means of implementation and support commitments'.

In addition, it was agreed that further work will be conducted to assess progress towards the outlined goals in the GGA framework and to identify potential indicators and quantified elements of those targets, which comprehensively captures the views of developing countries with regard to further work on the GGA.

New collective quantified goal on finance

A decision was also adopted at Dubai 'to enable the development of a draft negotiating text' on setting the new collective quantified goal (NCQG) on climate finance, which will be considered at CMA 6, to be held this November in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The NCQG 'ad hoc work programme' will 'build on the technical work conducted and the submissions made' in 2023 and 'allow for deliberations among Parties that are conducive to the development of a draft negotiating text'.

Developing countries had laid strong emphasis on the need to move into a 'negotiation space', going beyond the existing approach of holding technical expert dialogues (TEDs) on the NCQG. The thrust of their focus was on having a modality that would be 'Party-driven' to work on a 'negotiated decision text' that would be considered at CMA 6. Developed countries, on the other hand, while acknowledging the need for a negotiation space, had insisted on continuing with the modality of the TEDs for preparing a draft text by strengthening the dialogues.

Other decisions on finance

The Dubai talks adopted a host of other decisions on climate finance. Many of these decisions relate to 'urging' or 'encouraging' developed countries to meet their existing financial commitments, with little to show on actual delivery of climate finance.

The decision on long-term finance (LTF) '[n]otes with deep regret that the goal of developed country Parties to mobilise jointly USD100 billion per year by 2020 … was not met in 2021', and 'welcomes the ongoing efforts of developed country Parties towards achieving the goal of mobilising jointly USD100 billion per year'.

The key political fights on finance had centred around developed countries trying to remove references to 'developed country Parties' in the context of those responsible for providing and mobilising finance for developing countries; emphasis by developed countries on moving away from a 'bifurcated' approach of differentiation; and undue focus on the private sector and multilateral development banks to deliver climate finance.

Apart from the specific decisions on finance, the GST decision also has a section on the finance element. Its paragraph 67 states the following: 'Highlights the growing gap between the needs of developing country Parties, … highlighting that such needs are currently estimated at USD5.8-5.9 trillion for the pre-2030 period'.

Paragraph 68 states: 'Also highlights that the adaptation finance needs of developing countries are estimated at USD215-387 billion annually up until 2030, and that about USD4.3 trillion per year needs to be invested in clean energy up until 2030, increasing thereafter to USD5 trillion per year up until 2050, to be able to reach net zero emissions by 2050'.

Just transition work programme

One of the most contentious issues during the negotiations on the work programme on just transition pathways (JTP) had been over its 'scope'.

Developing countries wanted the scope to be broad and cover all three pillars of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) in the context of equity and CBDR-RC, while developed countries preferred it to be narrower and focus on the JTP for the workforce, primarily in relation to the energy transition, and also enhance ambitious domestic climate actions.

The final decision adopted caters to a broad scope. It was decided that 'the work programme shall include the following elements:

- Just transition pathways to achieving the goals of the PA outlined in Article 2.1, in the context of Article 2.2;
- Just and equitable transition, which encompasses pathways that include energy, socioeconomic, workforce and other dimensions, all of which must be based on nationally defined development priorities and include social protection so as to mitigate potential impacts associated with the transition;
- Opportunities, challenges and barriers relating to sustainable development and poverty eradication as part of transitions globally to low emissions and climate resilience, taking into account nationally defined development priorities;
- Approaches to enhancing adaptation and climate resilience at the national and international level;
- Just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities, including through social dialogue, social protection and the recognition of labour rights;
- Inclusive and participatory approaches to just transitions that leave no one behind;
- International cooperation as an enabler of just transition pathways towards achieving the goals of the PA'.

This final text has a measure of balance, with the coverage of national and international dimensions in its scope, in relation especially to adaptation and international cooperation. The 'recognition of labour rights' was also included in the scope of the work programme.

The decision also states that the implementation of the work programme will start this year under the Convention's Subsidiary Bodies, and agrees to review the effectiveness and efficiency of the work programme and consider its continuation in 2026. This decision regarding the timeframe is seen as a compromise; developed countries did not want the work programme to continue beyond three years, while developing countries wanted a longer timeframe.

Prospects for 2024

Given the very important and significant decisions taken in Dubai, the road to the next climate conference (COP 29), which will be held in Baku this November, is expected to be a rocky one. This is supposed to be a critical year for an outcome especially on the new climate finance goal.

Whether developed countries will have the appetite for genuine international cooperation when it comes to meeting their financial obligations under the Convention and the PA remains to be seen, all the more so when there are key elections taking place this year, especially in the US, the UK and the European Parliament.

If Trump returns to the White House, the US is once again likely to turn its back on climate change and leave the PA, as was the case in the last Trump era. What little the Biden administration has done for climate change in the US would be gutted, and climate denialism will rule. In such a scenario, expectations of any contribution on climate finance from the world's biggest historical polluter would be unrealistic. This would in turn pose a challenge for the rest of the rich world, who are not expected to plug any gaps left by the US.

On top of this, according to the Bloomberg news agency, the European Union's climate future will depend on who can form a majority in the EU Parliament after elections in June. An energy crisis unleashed by the Ukraine war, high inflation and the rise of far-right parties, Bloomberg says, make it hard to continue championing climate ambition and green energy transition on the campaign trail.

Looming over all this is the ongoing genocide in Palestine and Western complicity in the Israeli aggression, which has exposed the ugly truth of Western disrespect for international law and human rights even as they preach otherwise to the rest of the world. Little wonder then that trust between North and South is at an all-time low.

Within this context, the outlook for real international cooperation on climate change looks extremely challenging and bleak. ◆

Meena Raman is Head of Programmes at the Third World Network. This article was written with inputs from the TWN climate change programme team.

Notes

1. 'Planet Wreckers: How Countries' Oil and Gas Extraction Plans Risk Locking in Climate Chaos'. Oil Change International, September 2023.

COVER

COP-out in Dubai

The hollow deal from COP 28 to transition away from fossil fuels will not avert climate breakdown, but meaningful change can still be won.

Asad Rehman

AS COP 28 ended after 14 gruelling days, many people were clutching at straws and looking for meaning in the mere mention in the text of a transition from fossil fuels. There will be headlines talking about what huge progress it is simply to say this – even without any requirement for real action.

This would have been very welcome 20 or even 10 years ago, but it wasn't the gamechanger needed to prevent climate catastrophe, to end the era of deadly fossil fuels, or to save the north star of 1.5˚C. To claim that it is a triumph, or anything even close to that, is simply a lie.

One more lie to add to all the other lies told so often that those who utter them begin to believe them: the lie that rich countries care about climate justice. The lie that human rights are separate from climate justice. The lie that the US, Canada, Australia, Norway and the UK are high in ambition and it's developing countries that are lacking it.

Rich countries have worked hard to try to get a hollow headline on fossil fuels out of this COP. They are like emperors with no clothes. The UK, the US and the EU not only point-blank refused to discuss cutting their own emissions in line with both fairness and science, but their agreement on 'fossil fuel phase-out' has more loopholes than a block of Swiss cheese. It comes without acknowledgment of historical responsibility, or redistribution, or the remaking of a financial system of debt, tax and trade that has been rigged to keep developing countries locked into exploiting resources simply to fill the coffers of rich countries.

Our movements, our frontline communities, know these are lies. Scientists know they are lies, and so do many developing countries. Those already living the realities of unjust climate breakdown know that 1.5˚C will result in a death sentence for the poorest, yet we remain on track for 3˚C global heating.

Inside the halls of a lavish conference centre in Dubai Expo City – a conference centre built with the blood and sweat of thousands of exploited migrant labourers – powerful governments, with corporate lobbyists whispering in their ears, negotiated texts, all with profound implications for billions of lives globally. We have known from years of bitter experience that the climate talks are not only about carbon but about the global economy, about those who benefit from a rigged economy wanting to continue to benefit, even as it takes humanity to the edge of catastrophe.

We have never been under any illusion about the scale of the task facing us. Climate justice groups see the UN negotiations as a contested space where our power, as mass movements of people, is ranged against the power of corporate capital. We may not have the same access as the wealthy to ensure that decisions taken at the COP protect our interests. But we are adept at using all the tools at our disposal not only to keep our ideas alive, but to make them politically inevitable.

I am not a COP defeatist. I know that change can be won. On the opening day of the conference, the loss and damage fund was finally put into operation, although with pledges that are a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of damages. That fund was birthed by our movements, fought for at a time when many in the UN space, including mainstream environmentalists, openly claimed that justice was a distraction from the real goal of reducing carbon. The US administration, meanwhile, said that such an admission would be a red line, and that it would never accept responsibility for the damage it had caused. Our walkouts, our activities at a global and national level, our pressure and determination, and our detailed policy work have offered a glimmer of hope to many.

During the Dubai conference, the US climate envoy, John Kerry, said that never have we had to make decisions where the result is one of life and death. He was forgetting that the US recently vetoed a UN resolution to stop what other UN experts say are war crimes and a genocide in the making in Gaza. Despite attempts to silence us, we brought the voices of Palestinians into the climate talks – calling for not just a ceasefire but an end to the occupation. These calls are crucial. There can be no climate justice without human rights.

Those of us who fight for climate justice are often told we are on the fringe, or that we are being unrealistic. But it is the people with the most power at the moment who are being unrealistic. We are the ones who actually know this is a life-and-death fight. We are the realistic ones, and so we are the only hope for the future. So we will come back, stronger and more powerful, until it is the interests of people and not of profit that shape the climate talks. ◆

Asad Rehman is executive director of War on Want (waronwant.org), a movement of people working to end global poverty and human rights abuses. This article is reproduced from the Guardian *website (www.theguardian.com).*

Sharing the carbon budget

Instead of simply targeting global emission cuts, the UN climate negotiations must consider how the limited space left for carbon use is shared between developed and developing countries in light of their different needs and responsibilities. A discussion held on the sidelines of COP 28 explored this and other facets of climate justice.

Hilary Kung

How the remaining carbon budget – and responsibility for emissions reductions – is distributed should be the focus of the climate talks.

EXPERTS from developing countries have pointed out that the focus of climate talks must be on how the remaining carbon budget is distributed between developed and developing countries based on equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC). They also revealed the inequity of the global mitigation targets adopted from the scenarios of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

This was stressed by Dr. Tejal Kanitkar from India at a side-event held on 1 December, co-organised by the Third World Network (TWN) and the government of Bolivia, during the recently concluded climate talks in Dubai.

The event was moderated by Meena Raman, Head of Programmes of TWN, and was joined by Kanitkar, an associate professor from India; Diego Pacheco from Bolivia, who is also the spokesperson for the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDC); Professor T. Jayaraman, a senior fellow at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in India; and Andres Mogro, an expert on climate finance from Ecuador.

In her presentation on 'Deconstructing the global mitigation targets and enabling global just transition', Kanitkar said the carbon budget is the best available science which should be the global collective goal, not the 'reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 43% by 2030'. How to distribute the remaining carbon budget based on equity and CBDR-RC should then be the focus of the climate talks, she added.

Explaining further, Kanitkar said developed countries refuse to speak about their overuse of the global carbon budget and historical responsibility; instead, they focus on targets like: (a) reduction of emissions by 43% by 2030 (based on 2019 levels); (b) peaking of emissions by 2025; (c) global net-zero emission by 2050; (d) tripling of global renewable energy (RE) capacity by 2030; and (e) doubling energy efficiency by 2030.

[Some of these global mitigation efforts have been accepted in the decision on the global stocktake (GST) adopted at the conclusion of the Dubai talks.]

Said Kanitkar further, '[Y]ou can't talk about the fact that you need urgent action for the 1.5°C limit without talking about why is it that you need urgent action today. We wouldn't have needed urgent action if we weren't at 1.1°C already. So, the fact that you have such little carbon budget left is the reason why we are under so much pressure today.'

'It's high time we start deconstructing some of these targets and start talking about what are the real challenges that actually emerge, especially in the context of meeting all of these targets equitably, either in this decade or the next decade or in the foreseeable future,' urged Kanitkar.

She explained that the call for 'reduction in GHG emissions by 43% by 2030' came from the median value of the global modelled scenarios that have been assessed by the 6th Assessment Report of the IPCC. 'There are about 97 scenarios that the IPCC assessed, with a 50% probability, to limit warming to 1.5°C in this century. The median of these scenarios suggested a 43% reduction in GHG emission by 2030. However, these scenarios assume that developing countries have extremely high contribution to mitigation in this decade,' she said.

'Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, is expected to reduce emissions by 80% in this decade, whereas North America and Europe are to reduce emissions only by 50%, which is what they've said they would do in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs),' she said.

Kanitkar also said the scenarios assume that 'over 70% of the [carbon dioxide] removal is supposed to come from developing countries, largely from Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa'. Under the most stringent 1.5°C scenarios, the number of people at risk of hunger is going to increase because of land use conversion from food crops to energy crops (land-based mitigation that is assumed in these scenarios, including carbon dioxide removal through bioenergy, carbon capture and sequestration).

According to Kanitkar, under the IPCC scenarios, Annex I countries are expected to undertake a 43% reduction and non–Annex I countries a 45% reduction. 'What this means is that eventually, developing countries will provide the negative emissions that are required to sustain fossil fuel emissions, oil and gas use in the developed world,' she said.

[Annex I Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) include the industrialised countries that were members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1992, plus countries with economies in transition (the EIT Parties), including the Russian Federation, the Baltic States, and several Central and Eastern European States. Non–Annex I countries are all the developing countries.]

The alternative scenario constructed by Kanitkar and team, which adheres to the carbon budget of 500 gigatonnes to limit warming to 1.5°C, requires the developed countries to undertake immediate, sustained and rapid reductions right now in this critical decade (to reduce by at least 96%), while the non–Annex I emissions can see a small increase of 9% to 12% (not their fair share but a little more equitable than what the IPCC scenarios envision).

In the IPCC scenarios for a 2°C limit, Kanitkar pointed out, the extra budget is also allocated to the Annex I countries. In other words, developed countries get to reduce a little slower; but again, she explained, if we can have Annex I countries reduce more rapidly, there will be a little more room available for non–Annex I countries.

Regarding the peaking of emissions by 2025, Kanitkar again highlighted that 'it's only with very high emissions reductions in Annex I countries to reach net zero by the early 2030s that the developing countries get a little bit of room to peak a little later in the early 2030s … If you burden Annex I countries more in these scenarios, developing countries won't have to peak by 2025'.

Kanitkar added, 'We are scientists in the Global South; whatever it is, even if we're talking about equity, we understand that we need to limit warming. We need to address climate change … and therefore we need to adhere to science, and science tells us that we have a very limited carbon budget … The peaking [for developing countries in the alternative scenario] doesn't get delayed too much beyond 2030.'

As for the target of tripling the global renewable energy capacity, Kanitkar said, 'The real question to ask is: Where is this capacity going to be built? The electricity demand is highly varied across developed and developing regions. Developed countries don't have very high growth in demand. Developing countries have much higher growth and demand to catch up with their development needs, building infrastructure, building schools, roads, hospitals, housing, etc. All of that requires higher energy. Capital-scarce countries are going to have higher energy demand growth in the near term. If the United States retains its existing fossil fuel capacity, it will require only 26 gigawatts to meet its additional demand. Unless the tripling target goes hand in hand with a phase-out of fossil fuels in the developed countries, a large chunk of the burden of tripling RE capacity is going to fall on developing countries because that's where the new capacity is going to be needed.'

Finally, on the target of doubling energy efficiency by 2030, Kanitkar explained that energy efficiency is typically calculated at the firm level, but at the national level, the proxy that is used is the energy-to-GDP ratio.

Using the example of the US, Kanitkar pointed out that the reduction of energy intensity by 58% in the US between 1965 and 2018 was partly due to the movement from manufacturing to the services sector and improved technology. 'But their fossil fuel carbon dioxide emissions have increased by 58% in this period. So [an] energy efficiency target doesn't guarantee a reduction in emissions … our main target has to be emissions reductions [and] a doubling of energy efficiency really doesn't guarantee this.'

In addition, she said, 'Countries tend to have a higher and increasing trend in energy efficiency or energy intensity at a certain stage of development. When you have small and medium enterprises (SMEs), for example, it's much harder for SMEs to achieve energy efficiency or harder for them to use new technology and improved technology. You will have capital constraints. But once you achieve [economies of] scale, it becomes easier. So, the question remains, again, who is going to be burdened? [Are] those with currently high levels of energy intensity … going to be expected to do more to achieve this energy efficiency target? This means, for example, SMEs are going to find it much more challenging. So, there are actual implementation challenges of these targets, [though] they might look great on paper.'

Kanitkar also highlighted the significant lack of effort in the decades between 1990 and 2020. Annex I countries emitted 47% of total GHGs (without Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry – LULUCF) between 1991-2020 when they were supposed to take the lead in mitigation after the adoption of the UNFCCC, and this is why developing countries speak about the pre-2020 pledges and gaps.

Further, she said, 'The Annex I Parties which constitute about 19% of the global population are responsible for 68% of the historical carbon emissions, whereas the non–Annex I Parties which are 81% of the global population are responsible for only 32% of the historical emissions till 2019. [But] the historical shares are not stated as clearly in terms of developed and developing countries because you have developed countries refusing to speak of developed and developing countries. They want to break down this differentiation and not speak about the Convention that talks about this differentiation.'

Need to take into account historical emissions

Professor T. Jayaraman said the Paris Agreement (PA) 'did not start from just nowhere', explaining that 'the stark fact is that 1.1°C of warming above pre-industrial levels has already taken place, and this is more than two-thirds of the way to the 1.5°C limit. So, if you want to come and talk about the implementation of the PA, who is responsible for this 1.1°C warming?'

Pointing to efforts to blame developing countries for the climate crisis and referring to the idiom 'the straw that broke the camel's back', he said 'the camel is overloaded [in the first place] and then that last straw that is put breaks the camel's back – do you say, well, that straw is responsible [for the break]?'

The first thing for the GST to acknowledge, stressed Jayaraman, is the pre-2020 gaps (in implementation), CBDR-RC and historical responsibility.

Elaborating further on the GST and its 'ratcheting ambition', he noted, 'The assumption of the narrative is that developed countries are doing things quite well in the right direction and that developing countries are required to have more ambition, and that we have to do whatever you [developed countries] are doing.' However, he said 'we must assert in the GST that the forward-looking vision must be [based] on the vision of developing countries, the way they want to develop, and we must be free to pursue low-carbon development based on a fair share of the carbon budget'.

'The other thing we need to do … is turn our attention to adaptation … We need to adapt. What we cannot do by way of adaptation will result in loss and damage,' said Jayaraman further.

Expressing his frustration with adaptation finance, he said, 'Adaptation is the first and foremost necessity.' However, 'we have turned our backs on adaptation … Adaptation finance used to come from the proceeds of the Clean Development Mechanism … So, it is our money earned through carbon credits in terms of the Kyoto Protocol arrangements that provided for adaptation', he said, calling this 'a joke'.

Commenting on the use of the term 'transformational adaptation' in the discussions on the global goal on adaptation (GGA), Jayaraman said if one looks up the definition of transformational adaptation in the IPCC, it tells us to be prepared to 'change the social and economic structures of society to respond to climate change'. He questioned this, saying that 'South Asia only has 4% of global cumulative emissions with 17% of the population' and that 'if developed countries had the same per capita emissions as South Asia, we wouldn't have a climate crisis at all'. Yet 'developing countries are being asked to change our society, our social and economic structures, our social arrangement in order to cope with the emissions from the developed world'.

He added that there is not enough of the global carbon budget left and also not enough money for the developing countries, and so, there is no need to talk to developing countries about transformational adaptation.

On maladaptation, Jayaraman said he and his team have been analysing all the examples in the IPCC and will publish a report shortly. '[W]hat is the definition of maladaptation?' he asked. 'Does it mean no increase in emissions? So how do I build houses to protect people from extreme weather if I cannot have any emissions at all, when using concrete?'

He concluded by saying that 'we need a sensible and equitable just framework, a non-prescriptive, Party-driven, Party-implemented process that promotes adaptation across the world backed by adequate provision of finance, technology and knowledge, which is very important, and the capacity to cope with the future'.

Commenting on developed countries refusing to talk about the Convention, he said that 'in fact, to be a member of the PA, you have to be a signatory to the Convention'.

Erosion of equity and CBDR

Diego Pacheco spoke about the UNFCCC which some 30 years ago established the legal obligations and commitments of countries to resolve the climate crisis. The developed countries have obligations to reduce GHGs and to provide finance to developing countries to address the climate crisis, while developing countries were invited to make all the needed efforts to combat the climate crisis but contingent upon the provision of finance, technology transfer and capacity building. '[But] developed countries started challenging the

Convention and the understanding of the Convention on how to deal with the climate crisis,' he said.

Pacheco recalled how the LMDC group was formed in 2013 and how it engaged fully towards what is now called the Paris Agreement. He also recalled attempts made in Glasgow in 2021 at COP 26 to dilute and rewrite the PA, which were resisted by developing countries.

Pacheco questioned the push for global mitigation targets, like 'peaking by 2025 for all countries' and 'reduction of emissions of 43% by 2030', which are not in the PA but which only maintain global inequalities, widening the gap between North and South. 'That's why the LMDC has been defending the principles of equity and CBDR-RC,' he said. 'It's not new, and the principles are in the Convention and in the PA.'

Pacheco remarked that 'we now have developed countries saying that more capitalism is the solution to solve the problems that stem from capitalism, that more markets are the solution to solve the problems that stem from markets, and that more inequality is the way forward to solve the problems of inequality in the world. That means deleting and eroding the principles of equity and CBDR, [which] means having a scenario with no equity in the world. And that's the solution to solve the problems of the climate crisis!'

He explained that 'Bolivia worked hard in having Article 6.8 on non-market approaches in the PA' and 'we are still waiting and fighting for having direct access to the [resources of the] GCF [Green Climate Fund]'.

He said that 'we are very tired of waiting, but we need finance in order to deal with the climate crisis, and we need more justice in the world'. He added that 'we are going to continue fighting for the implementation of the PA, and in each COP, we are going to continue fighting for implementing the PA and the Convention, which means achieving some climate justice in the world'.

Climate finance ought to be new, additional and non-debt-creating

Andres Mogro said that in official terms, climate finance refers to the financial resources that are flowing from developed to developing countries for climate action and commitments coming from developed countries to provide new and additional financial resources to meet agreed full costs incurred by developing countries. However, he said, 'new and additional' has always been a difficult concept to negotiate because it implies not duplicating resources that are already being reported elsewhere.

Commenting on the newly operationalised loss and damage fund (LDF), Mogro warned that 'pledges are not actual deposits into the fund [and] we've had pledges in the past that have been outstanding forever, like the pledge of the US to the GCF [where the first pledge by President Obama has not been fully realised]'. 'But the bigger issue for me in the LDF,' he said, 'has to do with governance and with the capacity of the fund to improve its access to local communities.'

On the new collective quantified goal (NCQG), Mogro said it is a decision from the PA to have a process to set up a new goal on climate finance. 'New' implies a goal that would supersede the goal of $100 billion a year by 2020 (which has now become $100 billion a year by 2025, and it is still not met).

He said, 'The new goal opens up conversations on two things: quantitative issues and qualitative issues. The quantitative issues come from official sources like the biennial transparency reports next year [2024], but we do have a report from the Standing Committee on Finance (SCF) assessing the financial needs of developing countries to implement their NDCs. The SCF report speaks of a value between $5 and 11 trillion [needed by developing countries], which is about $400 to 500 billion a year.'

Even more important, Mogro said, is the quality of finance. 'Over 90% of finance goes to mitigation' and 'the same number is reimbursable [because] it's external debt; so we're quantifying the outflow of those resources to developing countries but we won't [be] quantifying the inflow back into developed countries. That brings out a bigger question as to who is paying for climate action worldwide, when most of the climate finance that is being channelled is debt, and we're having a new wave of external debt in developing countries right now from climate action.'

On Article 2.1(c) and the role of the private sector, Mogro commented that the private sector will only finance things where it can get financial revenue, otherwise it will not be involved; in adaptation, it is much more difficult to get revenue than in mitigation. [Article 2.1(c) of the PA deals with the goal of 'making financial flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development'.]

He said further that 'we should have all of our investments be as green as they can, but if we end up counting for all of that and putting a number on Article 2.1(c), then if it's the same number as the NCQG … we're just doing an accounting game … We, developing countries, are the ones paying for climate change, are the ones acquiring debt and developed countries are just washing their hands of everything that we've agreed to'. ◆

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The recording of the above side-event can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRTps-OOHqU.

'Global climate targets: Peaking, emissions reduction and renewable energy', a briefing paper by T. Jayaraman and Tejal Kanitkar, is available at https://www.twn.my/title2/briefing_papers/twn/Global%20climate%20targets%20TWNBP%20Nov%202023%20Jayaraman.pdf.

Fossil fuel phase-out – hype and hypocrisy

Radhika Chatterjee and *Indrajit Bose* give the lie to developed-country claims of leading the shift away from fossil fuel dependence.

AT COP 28 in Dubai, developed countries positioned themselves as supporters of a fossil fuel phase-out. If the commitment had been genuine and backed with real efforts back home, they could be lauded for it. However, for those who knew better, they were clearly playing to the gallery and wanted to shift the pressure to developing countries. It was a case of 'do as we say, and not as we do', because they are not walking the talk.

Several reports published in 2023 have stated that the developed countries, who are also among the biggest historical emitters, continue to have massive fossil fuel expansion plans going up to 2050.

A report by Oil Change International (OCI), titled 'Planet Wreckers: How Countries' Oil and Gas Extraction Plans Risk Locking in Climate Chaos',[1] identifies 'five global north governments … as the biggest climate hypocrites and most egregious Planet Wreckers: the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway and the United Kingdom'. These countries, 'despite having the greatest economic means to rapidly phase out production, and immense historical responsibility for causing the climate crisis … account for a majority (51 percent) of planned expansion from new oil and gas fields through 2050', states the report. 'Four of these countries (excluding Norway) are amongst the top ten historical contributors to the climate crisis based on their domestic emissions,' the report adds.

The report also states that new drilling in high-income countries with 'outsized historical responsibility for causing the climate crisis, while claiming to be climate leaders, is inexcusable'. In fact, these countries 'have the technical, financial, and economic ability to phase out fossil fuels the fastest'.

The report points out that an equitable phase-out trajectory for global oil and gas production based on economic capacity would see these countries completely phase out their own production by the mid-2030s while committing their fair share to finance a fair transition globally.

Further, several 'global north governments, such as top fossil fuel financier Japan, and companies headquartered in the global north play a key role in pushing and funding' fossil fuel projects, 'often to supply their own market', shows the OCI report.

Fossil fuel expansion plans of major historical polluters

US

According to the report, the US, 'the largest historical emitter of CO_2', is 'by far the largest oil and gas producer in the world: it was responsible for one in every five barrels of oil and gas extracted globally in 2022. In 2022, the US also led the world in new oil and gas extraction committed to development'.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)'s 'Production Gap Report: Phasing Down or Phasing Up? Top Fossil Fuel Producers Plan Even More Extraction Despite Climate Promises',[2] in March 2023, the US government 'approved the largest single oil project on federal lands, the ConocoPhillips Willow project in Alaska, which is projected to produce up to 180,000 barrels of oil a day as early as the late 2020s'.

The OCI report shows that the US is 'poised to be the world's largest expander of oil and gas extraction from 2023 to 2050, single-handedly representing more than one-third of planned global expansion'. US oil output is projected to rise to an average of 13.2 million barrels per day in 2024, and 13.4 million barrels per day in 2025, according to federal estimates.[3] For context, that's about half a million barrels per day more than the prior annual record set in 2019, according to a news report.[4]

Another report by OCI, titled 'Biden's Fossil Fuel Fail: How US Oil and Gas Supply Rises Under the Inflation Reduction Act, Exacerbating Environmental Injustice',[5] highlights the drawbacks of the US' Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which the country often cites as part of its ambitious climate action plans. This report details 'the most recent oil and gas production projections from the Rhodium Group's Climate Deck, which provide the first publicly-available analysis of energy and emissions under the implementation of the IRA. The projections anticipate an overall rise in oil and gas production under the IRA'. They 'demonstrate that the IRA supports a modest decline in US oil and gas demand while allowing an increase in oil and gas production and a dramatic rise in oil and gas exports'.

The findings of this report underscore that the IRA will itself not drive the phase-out of oil and gas production in the US but instead enable the continued expansion of production, keeping the US 'on course to be the biggest expander of oil and gas extraction in the world through 2050'.

Further, the Rhodium Group's model cited in the report projects that despite the IRA's investment in renewable energy, electric vehicles and batteries, the US could still miss its Paris Agreement goal of reducing its emissions by 50-52% below 2005 levels by 2030. The model's mid-emissions pathway suggests that 'US greenhouse gas emissions will total 4.42 billion metric tons in 2030. This is 34% below 2005 levels and misses the US Paris Agreement goal by 16 to 18 percentage points'. In any event, says the report, this goal is 'already insufficient to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. This is especially damning considering the United States' responsibility as the world's largest historical climate polluter to cut its emissions faster than the global average'.

In fact, 'moderate declines in US domestic consumption of oil and gas stimulated by the IRA's support for renewable energy and electric vehicle adoption are countered by significant increases in US oil and gas extraction, with the difference exported to global markets. The projected growth in US oil and gas exports substantially undermines domestic emissions reductions'.

Further, UNEP's Production Gap Report reveals that the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) forecasts that oil production will reach and remain at record high levels of 19-21 million barrels per day from 2024 to 2050, while gas production is projected to increase continuously, reaching 1.2 trillion cubic metres in 2050.

Shedding light on the US' liquefied natural gas (LNG) expansion plans, the Production Gap Report states that 'in July 2022, the US became the world's leading exporter of LNG and as of March 2023, the US Department of Energy had authorised 18 large-scale LNG export projects totalling 450 billion cubic metres per year of capacity'.

It is to be noted that recent research has demonstrated that 'domestically, natural gas is no better for the climate than coal, largely owing to the methane leaks associated with it; now, though, it appears that exporting LNG, because of the extra leakage of the supercooled gas during transit, could allow even larger amounts of methane to escape into the atmosphere and, hence, could do much more damage to the climate than coal does'.[6]

Canada

According to OCI's 'Planet Wreckers' report, 'Canada is on track to be the world's second largest developer of new oil and gas extraction from 2023 to 2050. Canada alone could be responsible for 10% of planned expansion globally … Canada ranks as the worst Group of 20 (G20) country for production subsidies and public finance for oil and gas.' UNEP's Production Gap Report shows that in Canada, both 'the federal and provincial governments have recently approved new oil and gas developments, such as the Bay Du Nord offshore oil project in 2022 and the Cedar LNG export terminal in 2023'.

Australia

Australia is 'the world's third largest exporter of fossil fuel pollution', according to the OCI report. The section on Australia in UNEP's Production Gap Report states that a 'government list of "major projects" showed 69 coal projects and 49 new oil and gas projects in the pipeline. These together represent nearly 5 GtCO2eq [gigatonnes of CO_2 equivalent] of potential emissions'.

Highlighting fossil fuel plans of the West Australian Environmental Protection Agency, the OCI report mentions that the Agency has 'recently approved an extension of nearly 50 years for Woodside Energy's North West Shelf gas processing facility – this would allow it to operate until 2070, as well as enabling new gas fields in the surrounding areas like Scarborough and Browse. By the company's own estimate, the project will cause around 4 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions, or almost a decade of Australia's annual climate pollution'.

The Australian government is 'missing half the equation' in acting on the climate crisis by backing a shift to renewable energy but having no plan to get out of fossil fuels, according to Prof Lesley Hughes, a leading climate change scientist who is a member of the independent Climate Council and government advisory body the Climate Change Authority. Hughes was quoted in a news report as saying there is a 'cognitive dissonance' between the government's stated commitment to addressing the problem and the pace at which it is moving. The dissonance, she says, is most clear in it subsidising or approving new and expanded fossil fuel developments while arguing it supports trying to limit global heating to 1.5°C.[7]

Norway

Norway is 'Europe's largest producer of oil and gas and one of the world's top 10 exporters of fossil fuel emissions', states the 'Planet Wreckers' report. 'Norway is pursuing an aggressive policy to increase oil and gas exploration, having awarded as many exploration licences from 2012 to 2021 as in the 47 years prior. In 2023, the Norwegian government awarded 47 new licences to 25 different oil and gas companies on the Norwegian shelf,' adds the report. 'Norway's continued promotion of oil and gas exploration and development is in stark contradiction with its international commitments.'

United Kingdom

Highlighting the contradictions of the UK government's legal framework of maximising 'economic recovery' from North Sea oil and gas production, the OCI report elaborates that the 'current government policy is to "max out" oil and gas extraction in the North Sea and give the North Sea a "new lease of life" by approving new fields and licences. This contradicts the advice of the Independent Committee on Climate Change, which stressed in its recent progress report: "Expansion of fossil fuel production is not in line with Net Zero. [...] The UK will continue to need some oil and gas until it reaches Net Zero, but this does not in itself justify the development of new North Sea fields."'

'In recent years, the British government pushed to approve new oil and gas projects, including the high-profile Cambo and Rosebank fields,' notes the report. 'In October 2022, the government opened a new licensing round, allowing over 100 new licences and blatantly defying climate science. The British Prime Minister re-announced plans for continued licensing of North Sea oil and gas in July 2023…'.

Further, UNEP's Production Gap Report shows that the UK government 'approved a major new coal mine in 2022, the first in over 40 years, which is intended to supply coal for the steel industry in the UK and abroad'.

The OCI report mentions that 'the United Kingdom played a leadership role as the convener of the Glasgow Statement/Clean Energy Transition Partnership launched at COP26, through which 38 other countries and institutions pledged to end international public finance for fossil fuel projects. However, this leadership is undermined by the UK's hypocrisy in its push to give North Sea oil and gas fields a "new lease of life"'.

A news report cites the UK government's climate advisers as saying Britain has 'lost its clear global leadership position on climate action'. The article states: 'The Climate Change Committee, which tracks the UK government's decarbonisation efforts, said in a new report that government backing for a new coal mine and new domestic oil and gas production undermined Britain's "international messaging" telling other countries to stop developing fossil fuels.'[8]

Germany

According to the Production Gap Report, Germany 'closed down its last hard coal mine in 2018, but remains the world's second-largest producer of lignite, the most carbon-intensive type of coal'. The report also highlights the continued reliance on coal by Germany. It mentions that 'in response to the 2022-2023 global energy crisis, Germany made changes to its laws to allow for a delay in closure of hard-coal-fired power plants, and reactivated both hard-coal and lignite-powered plants from the grid reserve until 31 March 2024. An amendment to the Coal Phase-out Act delayed the retirement of 1.2 gigawatts (GW) of lignite-fired power plants from 2022 until 31 March 2024 and, at the same time, brought the coal phase-out in the western lignite mining region forward from 2038 to 2030 (for 3 GW of lignite-fired power plants)'.

The 'intensive use' of German coal power plants led to additional emissions of 15.8 million tonnes of CO_2 in 2022, according to a report by consultancy Energy Brainpool commissioned by Green Planet Energy.[9]

Throwing light on Germany's fossil fuel expansion plans, UNEP's Production Gap Report says 'Germany has recently pushed for continued public investment in the gas sector by the G7 countries. The government also plans to build more LNG import terminals than any other EU country, spending at least EUR9.8 billion (USD11.3 billion) between 2022 and 2038'.

One news report has highlighted the contradictions of German energy policy: 'As the West champions green policies and urges the developing world to follow suit, Germany is engaged in the dismantling of a substantial wind farm to clear the way for the expansion of an open-pit lignite coal mine. This move, undertaken by German energy giant RWE, raises questions about the country's commitment to its environmental promises and the broader global effort to combat climate change. German energy giant RWE is undertaking the dismantling work in the western region of North Rhine Westphalia, where one wind turbine has already been dismantled. The company plans to weed out seven more to pave the way for an additional 15m to 20m tonnes of so-called "brown" coal to be excavated.'[10]

Fossil fuel subsidies of historical polluters

According to the Oxfam report 'Climate Equality: A Planet for the 99%', 'the 11 largest economies in the Global North provided the equivalent of US$1.8 trillion in direct and indirect fossil fuel subsidies in 2020, with the highest average per-person subsidies being in Russia (US$3,560), the USA (US$2,006), Australia (US$1,729) and Canada (US$1,686)'.[11]

In Canada, 'national and sub-national fossil fuel production subsidies totalled CAD2 billion (USD1.6 billion) in 2021 with over half going towards deep drilling credits in British Columbia for gas wells', UNEP's Production Gap Report states. The report adds, 'Between 2018 and 2021, the Canadian government also provided

CAD21.7 billion (USD16.6 billion) in public finance (i.e. loans, grants, and guarantees) for domestic fossil fuel development including pipelines.'

Elaborating on the use of the national tax system to subsidise fossil fuel production in Norway, the UNEP report mentions that although the country's tax system ensures a 78% effective tax rate on oil and gas production profits, 'the government effectively acts as a co-investor that shoulders a large share of risk in all new investments. To support the industry during the fall in oil price in early 2020, the government introduced a special tax scheme in which all new developments approved by the end of 2023 will benefit from special provisions … [T]his temporary scheme may amount to a tax subsidy of around NOK 26 billion (USD2.7 billion). The government provided further tax breaks and budget expenditures for oil and gas production (primarily for research, development, and demonstration) worth NOK 656 million (USD76 million) in 2021, according to OECD estimates'.

According to OCI's 'Planet Wreckers' report, the UK government gives 'generous domestic tax breaks to the oil and gas industry'. Explaining further, the report says, 'For example, the windfall tax, introduced [in 2022], features a major loophole that allows companies to claim tax relief on investments, making oil and gas companies eligible for up to GBP 11 billion in tax relief. Over the lifetime of the Rosebank oil field, Equinor and its partners will receive GBP3.75 billion in tax relief.'

Australia too seems to be providing substantial subsidies 'despite committing to end fossil fuel subsidies over 10 years ago as part of the G20', says OCI. The country 'continues to provide significant domestic fossil fuel subsidies, estimated at AUSD11.1 billion in 2021-22'.

In Germany, it is the lignite coal producers that enjoy subsidies from the government. According to the Production Gap Report, they benefited 'from mining royalty and water fee exemptions, amounting to EUR49.5 million (USD58.5 million) in 2021'. Highlighting the investments made by Germany in fossil fuels, the report notes that 'Germany's export credit agency (Hermes Cover), the German development bank (KfW), and the German Investment and Development Corporation jointly invested USD2.8 billion a year in public finance for fossil fuels in 2019-2021'. The report adds that 'a draft policy released by Germany's export credit agency in July 2023 indicates that the agency plans to continue supporting the development of new gas fields and related transport facilities until 2025 when justified by national security and in compliance with the Paris Agreement targets'.

End the hypocrisy

It needs to be highlighted in this context that 'not all fossil fuel producing countries have the same degree of dependence on fossil fuel revenues and ability to plan and implement economic diversification and just transition strategies, nor the same level of historical responsibility for driving climate pollution and exploitative models of resource extraction', a point made in the OCI report.

When it comes to the five developed countries (the US, Canada, Australia, Norway and the UK) responsible for the majority of planned expansion from new oil and gas fields through 2050, OCI stresses: 'Equity dictates that these countries accelerate their phase out pathways and pay their climate debt and their fair share of the global energy transition to Global South countries. Instead, they choose the path of hypocrisy: claiming the mantle of climate leadership while undercutting global climate targets by promoting new oil and gas extraction which will exacerbate climate impacts on the most vulnerable populations of the world.'

As they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and it is time for the developed countries to stop fooling the world and to halt their fossil fuel expansion, reverse course in emission trends and provide the necessary means of implementation to developing countries so the latter can embark on their just transition away from fossil fuel dependence while addressing their sustainable development needs and eradicating poverty. ◆

Radhika Chatterjee and Indrajit Bose are senior researchers with the Third World Network.

Notes

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Fossil fuel phase-out in developing countries requires new economic order

Developing-country representatives at COP 28 stressed the importance of economic and financial support for the move away from fossil fuel dependence in the Global South.

Radhika Chatterjee

Photo by IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis

Colombia's Environment Minister Susana Muhamad at COP 28.

'A NEW economic order that would help guide the economic and energy transition is required for addressing the challenge of climate change,' said Susana Muhamad, the Minister of Environment from Colombia, in a setting called the Majlis convened by the COP 28 President at the Dubai climate talks on 10 December.

Speaking in the context of science and the need for phasing out fossil fuels, she said, 'Let's recognise we need to phase out fossil fuel progressively – let's think we need a new economic deal for that.'

The Majlis – an Arabic term referring to a council or a special gathering – was established by the COP 28 President as an open-ended setting beginning on 10 December aimed at facilitating efforts to reach consensus in the Dubai negotiations.

The Majlis saw the participation of ministers and heads of delegation who were invited to find answers to two questions and come up with 'landing zones'. The guiding questions for the session were: (i) 'How do we build transformative ambition on mitigation while addressing just and equitable transitions and corresponding support requirements?' and (ii) 'How do we credibly tackle the gap in adaptation finance and action?' Several speakers representing countries and groupings took the floor to share their views.

Addressing the challenges of transitioning away from fossil fuels, Muhamad shared the difficulties her country has faced in dealing with its own transition away from oil. She pointed to the crucial need for aligning the economic and financial system to this transition.

The Colombian minister also acknowledged that the mechanism for making such changes does not lie with the UNFCCC. Sharing her country's own experience in mitigation action, she recounted, 'When our President [Gustavo Petro] said he will not sign any new coal or oil contract, the peso devalued the next day. Credit rating agencies downgraded us. How do we repay our debt? How do we deal with these kinds of contradictions?'

On the question of tripling renewable energy, she asked who would be expected to do that – 'those who are able to access capital at a rate of 5% [interest] or those who get it at 30%?'

[A big push in the Dubai talks under the global stocktake (GST) was on the phasing out of fossil fuels and the tripling of renewable energy along with other global mitigation targets.]

Stressing the challenges of the transition, especially for countries like Colombia and Saudi Arabia, whose economy is largely dependent on fossil fuels, Muhamad said, 'We need an economic plan for this. If we are able to recognise what are the difficulties, we need to see what science says. Let's face the difficult discussion of what that means and let's do it from a political perspective, not from a negotiation language. Then we can bring that political perspective into the negotiation language.'

Barbara Creecy, the Minister of Environment of South Africa, speaking about her country's experience with implementing a just energy transition framework, said, ‘Today, we have received less than 10% of the support for what we need between now and 2030 for the implementation plan. For many developing countries, particularly in the African continent, the gap is not in ambition; it is in the question of means of implementation.’

Several other developing-country ministers and representatives also highlighted the gaps in the means of implementation and the lack of delivery of climate finance by the developed countries as a major barrier to their mitigation ambition.

Some developing countries also stressed the importance of recognising the principles of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) as set out in the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement (PA) to keep in mind the differentiation between developed and developing countries, especially the fact that the two have different starting points from which they are expected to take climate action.

Reaffirming their commitment to delivering on climate action, developing countries said the problem is not a lack of ambition on their part but the lack of means of implementation. They pointed out the need for delivering climate finance and doubling adaptation finance, and also emphasised the need for maintaining the bottom-up nature of the PA in the formulation of nationally determined contributions (NDCs).

Many developed countries and some developing countries like the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) underlined the need to raise mitigation ambition for keeping the 1.5°C goal within reach, adding that pathways for keeping to the goal are ‘in line with science’. Calling for ambitious actions, many of them mentioned global targets like tripling renewable energy by 2030, doubling energy efficiency, peaking global emissions by 2025, and reducing emissions by 43% by 2030 from 2019 levels.

On the issue of climate finance, developed countries acknowledged the importance of public finance, but at the same time also said that the private sector and multilateral development banks (MDBs) have an essential role to play in scaling up climate finance delivery.

Bolivia, speaking on behalf of the Like-Minded Developing Countries grouping, made a strong intervention saying the solutions to the two guiding questions for the Majlis lay in the UNFCCC and the PA. It said, ‘The solution is to implement the principles of equity and CBDR.’

Speaking in the context of unity and the need for action, it said, ‘There are progressive forces trying to create action, but there are also forces that are pushing back against collective action and solidarity. These forces are coming from the Global North. We see a lot of procrastination and the introduction of unilateral measures like the carbon border adjustment mechanisms (CBAMs). This is making it very hard to find solutions to the climate crisis.’

Calling out the hypocrisy of developed countries, it said, ‘We see hypocrisy in the push for hard goals for developing countries, while developed countries are taking business-as-usual solutions. But they are creating a lot of difficulty for developing countries.’

‘Several countries are saying we push out fossil fuels, but those countries are planning the expansion of fossil fuels,’ Bolivia further said, adding that these countries included the United States, Australia, Norway, Canada and many others. ‘We need to expose the hypocrisy and the lies.’

Highlighting the failure of developed countries to deliver climate finance, it asked where was the $100 billion that developed countries had promised to give by 2020. ‘Developed countries have to respect their obligations on finance towards developing countries,’ it said and pointed out that developed countries were using Article 2.1(c) of the PA ‘to transfer their responsibilities from the public sector to private sector and MDBs. They are shifting away their responsibilities by cherry-picking articles of the PA to create a new narrative and erode the PA. This is clear injustice.’

Referring to the GST, Bolivia said, ‘We cannot create a pathway of injustice to solve a climate crisis. In the GST there are two pathways we could choose as countries. The first pathway is the one that is created in the new narrative of keeping 1.5°C within reach and putting similar targets for all countries to achieve net zero by 2050. This is against the PA. The PA says let’s be carbon-neutral by mid-century and gives developing countries the space for development. But now countries like Bolivia and Uganda are being asked to achieve net zero in the same year as the US and Germany.’ Expressing its frustration over the injustice of the situation, Bolivia said ‘the developed world did their peaking in 150 years. But they are pushing developing countries to achieve peaking in 20 years! This is completely against justice.’

Speaking about the way forward after the GST, it said, ‘Countries can choose pathways of carbon colonialism, which will create more dependency of the Global South on the Global North. It will create more indebtedness and climate injustice. Or we could take the pathway of climate justice which involves the protection of Mother Earth to defend the legitimate interest of developing countries to truly address this climate crisis.’

Tuvalu, speaking on behalf of AOSIS, laid emphasis on the 1.5°C goal, saying, ‘Every COP 28 decision needs to be screened against the 1.5°C [goal]. We need to have a strengthened commitment to phasing out fossil fuels.’

Sharing its views on mitigation ambition, it pointed to a ‘mitigation ambition package including peaking of emissions by 2025, rapid and deep reduction of emissions of 43% within this decade, also reduction of emissions by 60% by 2035. We also have to deal with the issue of phasing out fossil fuels and phase out fossil fuel subsidies'.

In the context of the means of implementation, AOSIS called for 'enhanced climate finance, doubling adaptation finance, with ready access for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). We also call for a technology implementation programme and capacity development'.

Bangladesh, Samoa, Micronesia, Costa Rica and Marshall Islands shared similar views.

China shared an analogy: 'We are doing a marathon together, not a 100-metre sprint. The crisis tells us we must act. This is not a sprint. Tackling climate crisis and lowering carbon emissions is not like a sprint. There are two batches of runners. The first batch are the forerunners, the developed countries. They should have a greater, faster speed to increase the score to reach the goal of the PA. The only way we can achieve the speeding up of reaching the goal of the PA is if they run faster. We all understand very well the principle of CBDR, which means we have different starting points. Those forerunners should help those who are behind, the latecomers.'

China said further that 'We are a big family and should help each other. Developed countries should help developing countries to implement with climate finance that is in the common interest of all.'

It added that, 'to achieve a great success for everybody, we must respect the autonomous nature of NDCs, something which is clearly stipulated in the PA. We should support the Presidency to act within the mandate, to step up ambition under the principle of CBDR, and support developing countries to mitigate climate change. Finance, technology and capacity building should be commensurate with climate actions.'

China also stressed that for any global efforts, we have to be against unilateral measures (in an apparent reference to carbon border measures introduced by the European Union).

Brazil pointed out the need to address the financing gap before raising the issue of the implementation gap. It said, 'It is very difficult to do something without the necessary means. Let's talk about the means first. And it is on the basis of those means [that] we will take up our ambition for climate justice. We know everyone has to be called in, developed and developing countries. Science, ethics and politics are asking us to step up to the mandate. We have managed to reduce emissions by saving forests. We cannot act alone. We need everyone to act. The means of implementation have to be aligned with our decisions and ambition.'

Speaking about its expectations from the GST, Cuba said, 'As far as developing countries are concerned, the package under the GST needs to reflect balance between the different pillars. The text continues to show imbalance in treatment of adaptation. On mitigation, fundamental principles are being undermined, in particular, the obligations of developed countries on the need for them to take leadership role.'

It added, 'A part of the package has to recognise the gap in adaptation finance. Developed countries have to double adaptation finance. We have to accept the fact that there are different pathways for just transition on the basis of different capacities of different countries.'

Highlighting the importance of keeping needs and priorities of developing countries in mind, Saudi Arabia said, 'We have to follow science without cherry picking and address low-emissions technology. We have to also take into account all efforts towards sustainable development, poverty eradication, just transition. Climate change is a global problem and needs a global response.'

Iraq echoed similar views as shared by the various developing countries.

The European Union (EU) stressed on the need for raising mitigation ambition and said, 'We need to peak emissions by 2025. We must reduce global emissions by 43% [based on 2019 levels] in this decade. We must achieve net zero by 2050 and reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. Our NDCs have to be in line with the 1.5-degree pathway, going beyond current NDCs. We have to focus on phasing out fossil fuels.'

On the issue of providing climate finance to developing countries, it said, 'Developing countries will need support for finance, technology and capacity building. We need the new collective quantified goal on climate finance (NCQG) to be much more accessible and affordable. We also have to attract private investments. The role of Article 2.1(c) of the PA is to propose a dedicated space to make it work.'

Detailing its efforts to raise finance for meeting adaptation needs of developing countries, the EU said it plans to double its contribution by 2025 from 2019 levels. It added, 'Public sector is important. But MDBs are also important to this task.'

Germany, Norway and Switzerland (speaking on behalf of the Environmental Integrity Group) echoed similar views as the EU.

The United Kingdom said, 'We wish to see phase-out of fossil fuels. We can be flexible about language around that, for example, phasing out unabated fossil fuels.' Speaking about the need to double adaptation finance, a pledge made at COP 26 in Glasgow in 2021, it said 'we can find landing points so that we can ensure the single pasture on which all of us depend is safe for future generations'. ◆

Radhika Chatterjee is a senior researcher with the Third World Network.

Green face, old tricks

The free market is unlikely to deliver the required transition to a clean-energy economy, much less one that works for all.

Nick Dowson

TWO films I've seen over the past year both dealt with human consequences and lives against the backdrop of new, largely faceless renewables projects at opposite ends of Spain. *Alcarràs* is a heartbreaking story of a family of peach farmers in Catalonia who are being evicted to make way for solar panels, while *As Bestas* (The Beasts) is an altogether darker thriller about extreme interpersonal conflict triggered by divisions over whether to accept a new wind farm in the Galician hills.

The arrival of this theme into our cultural moment is indicative of the material shift taking place in the real world as new green technologies are increasingly deployed, the impacts reverberating. A new economy is taking shape, although it is not clear yet whether it will result in a move away from fossil fuels or an energy expansion (JustAddRenewables™).

Daniel Andraski

'Long-term electric vehicle manufacturing plans detract from solutions we can implement now, like supporting public transport and making it easier for people to walk or cycle around cities.'

Plus ça change

Wherever there is a new market, there are corporate interests looking to make a profit, and to capitalists the challenge of climate change is no different. On one level: what's not to like? We need an accelerated transition and if capitalism is the only train in town, why not get on board?

But the jury is out on whether the global market economy is capable of the changes needed to prevent climate catastrophe. And even if it is, it won't be a transition that works for people. In fact, all the signs suggest that the new green face of capitalism is replicating the sins of the old: domination by corporate giants of the Global North, ignoring local communities, implementing extractivist models and dispossessing Indigenous groups, profiteering and plunging millions into poverty through energy bill hikes.

But it's worse than that, as we're in what civil engineer and environmental sociologist Emily Grubert has described as the 'mid-transition'. 'We still live in a fossil capitalist world but are laying the material groundwork for a renewable energy and zero-emissions world,' explains researcher and activist Thea Riofrancos, who has written extensively about extractive industries. 'They're simultaneous.'

That means we are seeing a doubling of harms, both those of the old energy system as well as the impacts of building out a new one. Meanwhile, a profit-oriented transition looks set to repeat the devastation of previous industrial shifts, like the destruction of peasant agriculture or Margaret Thatcher's abrupt closure of UK coal mining as a blow against union power.

Green neoliberalism, no thanks

As I write this, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – its monarchs fabulously wealthy on the back of oil – is playing host to the UN climate talks. Chairing the event is Sultan Al Jaber, the head of its national oil company Adnoc, talking a good game while continuing to keep the black stuff flowing.

This is characteristic of climate capitalism as a whole, which is full of wolves in sheep's clothing making great green promises while their real concern is good old profits. It encompasses not just wind and solar power and electric vehicles (EVs) – surely needed to some extent – but also biofuels, carbon credits, carbon capture, 'green' hydrogen and more.

To see the latter simply as greenwashing is however to ignore their very real consequences, not only in the billions of dollars diverted to pay for them, but also their real-world impacts. All too often land is used without real consent, and profits are rarely shared with local people.

Carbon credits are particularly Orwellian. At best, they serve as an excuse for polluters to continue polluting, but many of these projects also seem to exacerbate the deforestation they purport to prevent, while enabling the latest wave of dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

When proper climate finance is lacking, this makes hard-up states and communities easy prey for such schemes. 'If historic polluters are saying "We will not pay for climate reparation" ... the only option available [for African governments] is [to turn to] carbon markets,' said economist Fadhel Kaboub recently, commenting on recent deals to hand over huge swathes of Africa for carbon credit schemes.

This new economy follows the tried-and-tested path of neoliberalism, which is to say: states forcibly creating new markets, pushed particularly by the wealthiest countries. From the extension of electricity markets (artificial and full of contradictions) to these dubious carbon markets, creating new commodities is seen as the solution.

In the US, Joe Biden's 2022 Inflation Reduction Act has allocated $400 billion to supporting green energy as well as subsidies for every stage of the EV supply chain, including domestic mining for battery production. It also illustrates some of the issues with blunt subsidies: incentives for households to install heat pumps have been swallowed up by huge price increases as private equity firms aggressively buy up installation companies, decreasing competition.

Meanwhile the EU has thrown billions of dollars into creating an entirely new market for green hydrogen – an unhelpful distraction to the needed push for more renewables and electrification. And megabucks have also been thrown at fossil fuel companies to try and conjure a carbon capture sector into existence, perpetuating the mirage that this techno-solution can allow us to continue burning fossil fuels.

'The UK government had said they were going to stop giving money to biomass in 2027, but they are looking at giving money for bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, which doesn't exist at scale,' says Merry Dickinson, a campaigner with Biofuelwatch and the Stop Burning Trees coalition who lives near the Drax power station in Yorkshire, a former coal plant that now burns wood and is the UK's largest emitter.

A Drax executive sat on the UK government's Climate Change Committee, which recommended the technology in the UK's sixth carbon budget in 2020. Meanwhile wood pellet manufacture is subsidised by the government in Canada, from where some of the power plant's fuel is sourced.

The current focus on putting electric cars on the road is a key example of how the desire to turn us into green consumers is distorting the transition. Long-term EV manufacturing plans detract from solutions we can implement now, like supporting public transport and making it easier for people to walk or cycle around cities. Meanwhile, unlike tried-and-tested alternatives such as electric trains and trolleybuses, electrifying cars will require huge amounts of mining to manufacture electric batteries.

'Some amount of mining is needed in the near term,' says Riofrancos. 'But I think we can have a transition with much less material impact. To reduce the harm, we need to reduce the volume of mining.

'Recycling is extremely important but we also need to change the transportation sector,' she adds, for example through developing urban mass transit and shifting away from larger cars like SUVs.

Solarpunk

If the state is intervening so heavily to create markets, shouldn't public power instead be used to create a transition that works for all of us?

That will have to be one that is built democratically. 'We need a phase-out of fossil fuels as part of a just transition towards a clean energy economy with quality jobs for workers and communities, led by those most affected,' says Rosemary Harris, Oil Change International's Senior North Sea Campaigner.

A just transition will not be compatible with endless growth everywhere – instead, we should prioritise good living for all. Making better use of the resources we have will be crucial, from boosting public transport to recycling energy transition minerals, from robust collective schemes to massively increase energy efficiency to rolling out rooftop solar. We'll need to stop doing some things too – like manufacturing weapons – but how to create a market for doing less? A just transition will also require us to rebuild public services and construct a more caring economy.

'The important thing is to put sovereignty and the role of the state front and centre,' says Sebastian Ordoñez Muñoz, senior programmes officer for Latin America at War on Want. We need 'interventions in the global economy around trade, tax and debt', he adds, as well as more participatory decision making for frontline communities in the Global South, and changes to how energy is consumed in the Global North.

Muñoz points to the need

for critical worker engagement in the transition – like Brazil's trade union congress, the CUT, which has supported a move from fossil fuels while questioning the way the new renewable sector is being set up – and examples like Costa Rica's publicly owned renewable energy system, which includes collaboration between national and regional bodies and several cooperatives.

Pressure from below is essential, according to Riofrancos, but she sees several reasons to hope. Firstly there's increasing pushback against extractive projects, including through transnational and North-South alliances: 'Communities are more conscious of their rights under international law, as Indigenous people… that is a sea change.'

She is also heartened by increased attention on the role of public ownership in the energy transition and points to the failure of several major 'green capitalist projects', including offshore wind plans in the UK and the US that have pulled out of government contracts because of viability issues. 'It forces the question, why do we need not just to socially pay for all the costs of the transition, but on top of that, ensure it's profitable for capitalists?' she adds.

'With the development and manufacturing of transition technologies under public ownership and democratic control, ecological damage could be minimised and the social benefits maximised,' says Lavinia Steinfort, a political geographer and activist who works on energy democracy at the Transnational Institute.

After all, climate change – although perhaps the most urgent and universally apocalyptic – is not even the sole ecological challenge we face. We can play whack-a-mole, but simply swapping out energy technologies has no hope of solving what has been dubbed the polycrisis, but which is more accurately understood as the crisis of capitalism.

'In Yorkshire there are deficits in health and care services. We need housing insulation,' says Dickinson. 'There's a wide range of opportunities for actual decarbonisation.' We just need to kick out the snake oil salesmen and take the power back. ◆

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Rich countries are in (climate) debt default

The Global South is effectively owed a climate debt of some $2.4 trillion by the historical polluters of the North. What it's getting instead is a mix of financial crumbs, structural traps and dubious promises of 'green industrialisation'.

Fadhel Kaboub

Photo by IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis

A demonstration at the COP 28 venue. Climate finance is a climate debt owed by the historical polluters of the Global North to Global South countries on the frontlines of climate change.

CLIMATE finance requires a minimum of $2.4 trillion of transformative grant-based investment and transfer of technology for climate change adaptation and mitigation by 2030. We are nowhere near that target. Climate finance is a climate debt owed by the historical polluters of the Global North to Global South countries that are on the frontlines of climate change. The Global North is in default and is refusing to pay its debt.

If you owe me $100, you are supposed to pay me. Instead, you give me a $10 loan with conditionalities to control how I use my money. You give me another $10 in exchange for having control over my forests (aka carbon markets). You invest another $10 in green electricity that I must export to you on favourable terms. You outsource another $10 worth of low-value-added manufacturing to produce cheap consumer goods for you. None of this should count as climate finance. It is a climate debt default greenwashed with neocolonial debt traps.

If a Global South country defaults on its external debt, the Southern District of New York court will allow Wall Street private banks to confiscate any financial assets that country has in the US banking system, including export revenues that pass through the system. We need to establish a climate debt court in the Southern District of the Globe, staff it with the most qualified legal minds from the Global South, and start prosecuting climate debt cases using legal precedents that have been used to impoverish and abuse the people of the Global South.

We are owed at least $2.4 trillion in climate finance by 2030, so we need to withhold and confiscate the equivalent of that debt in cash and in kind until the debtors come forward and pay their debts in the form of unconditional grants and transfer of technology. Unfortunately, the Global South has yet to build an unbreakable united front. Instead, we see countries settling for bilateral deals that amount to financial crumbs and structural traps.

The biggest blind spot of COP 28

The debate about reforming the global financial architecture to create a fit-for-purpose climate finance model is encouraging, but it needs to recognise that the financial architecture is a subset of a global economic architecture that also includes the international trade, investment and taxation architecture. We are making some progress on transforming the global tax architecture thanks to a recent Global South victory at the United Nations General Assembly, which voted overwhelmingly for a UN Tax Convention.

We are also finally having

a serious discussion about transforming the global financial architecture. At COP 28, Colombia, Kenya and France announced the establishment of an independent expert review on debt, nature and climate. The expert group will examine the way sovereign debt is limiting the fiscal space needed to take climate action, decarbonise the economy and protect nature. This is, of course, a promising initiative to help redesign the global economic architecture.

However, this leaves the rules of international trade and investment as the main blind spot in COP 28. There is no mention of the World Trade Organization (WTO), no mention of unfair bilateral trade agreements that are unfavourable to the Global South, no mention of reforming the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) in the context of transfer of technology for climate action on adaptation and mitigation, no mention of the need to overhaul the investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism or investment court system (ICS) through which Global South countries can be sued by foreign investors if the state takes action that interferes with the investor's (extractive) business plans.

Africa's priority should be to produce and deploy clean energy infrastructure to serve the 600 million people who currently have no access to electricity.

The carbon tax Trojan horse

Polluters are being cornered thanks to the mounting pressure from civil society around the globe. So they are now willing to accept a tax rather than being regulated, because they know they can either pass the tax burden on to consumers or avoid it altogether via loopholes they lobby for or by using 'creative accounting' and transfer-pricing techniques. Taxation alone is not going to work. We need to tax and regulate pollution out of existence.

Furthermore, carbon tax is now a trade weapon Trojan horse against developing countries. Consider the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) regulations that were introduced in 2023. It is the other side of the coin of a neocolonial so-called 'green industrialisation'. Low-value-added assembly-line manufacturing that is no longer needed in Europe will be outsourced to Africa and undertaken via low labour cost and cheap renewable energy produced in Africa. Those products from Africa's green industrial zones will be exempt from the CBAM tax, thus offering European consumers a cheaper cost of living. In other words, CBAM coupled with this type of 'green industrialisation' is simply a neocolonial inflation protection strategy for the EU that can cost Africa $25 billion per year.

There was a lot of excitement about green industrialisation at COP 28, which is wonderful, except for the fact that there is a spectrum of industrialisation ranging from low- to high-value-added content and technological sophistication. Yes, we want manufacturing to be powered by clean energy produced in the Global South and we do want to create millions of jobs with decent wages, good working conditions, and strong social and environmental protections. But we do not want to be once again locked at the bottom of the global value chain, and we do not want the type of 'industrialisation' that takes advantage of low-cost labour and fiscal incentives in order to take clean energy away from local people who live without access to electricity and to export low-cost consumer products to the Global North instead of manufacturing desperately needed products to raise the quality of life in the Global South.

Africa's manufacturing priorities should be to produce and deploy the clean energy infrastructure to serve the 600 million people who currently have no access to electricity, to manufacture and deploy clean cooking technology to protect the 970 million people (mostly women and children) who are inhaling toxic fumes on a daily basis, and to manufacture and deploy clean transportation infrastructure across the continent and its urban centres. In other words, we want the high end of the green industrialisation spectrum to be our policy target so we can escape the bottom of the global value chain. ◆

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The grim realities of Western climate change discourse on Africa

As the climate crisis intensifies, and as the Global North increasingly looks to Africa's vast mineral resources and natural carbon sinks for salvation, we must be ever more vigilant in asking where African peoples fit into these narratives.

Nteranya Ginga, Tshimundu, Koko Ginga and J. Munroe

AS the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was gearing up for elections in December 2023, the US magazine *The Atlantic* published an article, by Senior Editor Ross Andersen, initially titled 'War in the Congo Has Kept the Planet Cooler'. After uproar on social media, on which one user paraphrased the headline as 'Death of Africans Good for Planet', the title was changed to 'The Grim Ironies of Climate Change'.

This was perhaps an improvement, yet the headline was not the only problem. The article remains problematic in subtle but important ways for how we think – and, crucially, talk – about climate change, especially in how it relates to Africa, a continent that has alternately been pitched as unfortunate victim or unlikely saviour of the climate crisis. In these framings, both present in the *Atlantic* piece, African people are rendered invisible.

The core argument presented in Andersen's article is that decades of conflict in the DRC have reduced opportunities for mass deforestation. He notes that 'so far, the Congo's 500 million acres of forest have remained largely intact' and suggests that it is due to ongoing instability that 'multinational companies have been slower to set up large slash-and-burn operations than they have in, say, Brazil'. Having established this, he posits that: 'Any decent human being has to hope that a more stable peace will soon come to the Congo, even though it will likely mean more intense deforestation.'

Andersen's basic thesis – that conflict has stymied large-scale logging operations – may be accurate. However, his decision to make this argument in this way reveals a problematic and worrying outlook that says much about mainstream Global Northern perspectives on Africa and climate change.

To begin with, the *Atlantic* article's framing of the unstable DRC's relatively intact forest as one of the 'grim ironies of climate change' betrays an offensive Western-centric viewpoint that devalues the lives of central Africans. To call something a 'grim irony' not only suggests that a positive and negative are inextricably intertwined but implies that they are of roughly equivalent moral value. This implied equivalence is perhaps easy to make casually, as *The Atlantic* does, if you regard the positives of less deforestation and the negatives of intractable war as similarly abstract. It is much harder to do if you have genuinely contended with the pain, heartbreak, loss and devastation that tens of millions of people have endured as a result of conflicts in the Congo. It is much harder to do if you've confronted the brutal and concrete reality of what it means that 5.4 million people died in the Second Congo War, the deadliest war since WWII, or if you have insight into what life is like for the nearly 7 million people who are currently internally displaced in the DRC due to violence and atrocities, extreme poverty, and unregulated mining expansion.

A further example of the article's casual devaluing of African lives lies in Andersen's decision to limit his interest to deforestation. Once again, the author's very narrow thesis may hold water, but only as it brackets out many other environmental harms exacerbated by conflict.

For example, the article neglects to mention that, as well as inhibiting 'corporate-scale' tree-clearing operations, the conflict has also prevented effective responses to alarming environmental degradation caused by unregulated mining. Amid the instability of war, several armed groups exploit mines – and employ tens of thousands of child labourers in the process – to fund their operations. These unsafe activities have led to widespread heavy metal pollution to land, water, soil and crops. This has caused an increase in birth defects in many areas and forced whole communities to move. Ongoing conflict in the DRC has also contributed to a situation in which 190 threatened species are critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable. This includes the Grauer gorilla population which has decreased by nearly 80% over the past two decades, bringing them closer to extinction.

A better understanding of the complexities of the relationship between conflict and the environment in the DRC begs the question of why Andersen focuses solely on deforestation. The obvious answer is that it reflects with the priorities of the Global North. When it comes to international climate action, rich countries' primary concern is the reduction of global carbon emissions so as to mitigate damage caused by the climate crisis in the future (as opposed to, say, adaptation in the here and now). Seen from North America therefore, the most important thing about the DRC's rich environment is that its forests continue to keep as much carbon out of the earth's atmosphere as possible. All other environmental concerns – including those with horrifying consequences for the lives, livelihoods, safety and wellbeing of tens of millions of central Africans in the here and now – are, at best, secondary.

As the climate crisis intensifies, and as the Global North increasingly looks to Africa's vast mineral resources and natural carbon sinks for salvation, we must be ever more vigilant in asking where African peoples fit into these narratives. Are they implicitly treated as disposable and doomed, as potential collateral damage in pursuit of the greater good, their wellbeing regretfully pitched against reduced carbon emissions? Or are they recognised in their full humanity?

An article that took the latter starting point could still have noted the same relationship between conflict and deforestation. However, instead of making this its main 'grimly ironic' point, it could have started with this basic premise and explored how the DRC can protect its forests under a situation of greater peace. ◆

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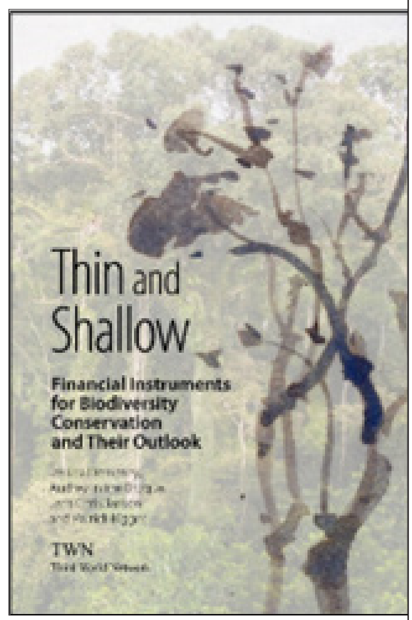
Thin and Shallow: Financial Instruments for Biodiversity Conservation and Their Outlook

Jessica Dempsey
Audrey Irvine-Broque
Jens Christiansen
Patrick Bigger



Published by TWN
Year: 2024 No. of pages: 55

This paper examines the track record of private financial mechanisms aimed at funding conservation of biological diversity. It finds that, due to lack of rigorous and consistent benchmarks and monitoring, these investments may not necessarily safeguard biodiversity and could even, in some cases, have adverse impacts. Further, despite decades of attempts to draw private capital to biodiversity protection, the quantum of finance remains limited, especially in the highly biodiverse countries of the Global South where it is most needed.

Written for a research project established by a group of central banks and financial supervisors, this paper cautions these authorities from deploying resources towards promoting such biodiversity-focused private financial instruments. Instead, the supervisory bodies are urged to step up policy coordination to address drivers of biodiversity loss in the financial system.

Available at: https://www.twn.my/title2/books/pdf/Thin%20and%20shallow.pdf

The New Cold War and the risk of nuclear annihilation

Rampant militarism and leaders willing to take a chance on the fate of the world for economic advantage are increasing the threat of nuclear disaster.

Charles Derber and Suren Moodliar

THE Cuban missile crisis of 1963 is etched into the minds of anyone old enough to experience the terror it triggered. For the first time, our leaders had ordered and succeeded in creating a military system that could destroy us all – and where there was and remains no possible way to survive the inevitable conflict. The reasons for the pursuit of nuclear weapons are different than those publicly described and have little to do with deterring strikes from other countries. Instead, the nuclear programme reflects a mad willingness to pursue global profit and power with force, even at the risk of extinction of all life on the planet.

This mad system remains today. It is even more dangerous now than during the Cold War. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis, nuclear weapons posed a threat to extinction that would likely destroy all life on the planet; today, prospects of general nuclear war are out of the headlines and largely out of our minds – even with the dangerous escalation of this threat focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Until Russia invaded Ukraine, recent wars seemed to many as less likely to become global nuclear wars and more limited or survivable conflicts – whether they were battles with smaller 'jihadist' groups, trade wars, immigration battles, and culture wars internal to nations. With terrorism rather than a nuclear Soviet empire at the core of the Western security narrative, the argument has been that current threats – while very dangerous – can likely be managed without a massive nuclear conflagration.

This is a form of denialism by inattention and repressed fear, as well as elite-managed propaganda to help keep the public calm. It ignores the dangers posed by Western and non-Western development of nuclear arsenals, the breakdown of conventional and nuclear arms control treaties, perpetual US wars to protect global power and profit, and the rise of a New Cold War era centred around direct or proxy conflicts with Russia and China, which can escalate over time into nuclear wars.

US Air Force photo by R.J. Oriez

Display of intercontinental ballistic missiles at a US Air Force base. According to famed Vietnam War whistleblower, the late Daniel Ellsberg, extinction by nuclear war is as great and probable a threat as during the Cold War.

Pointing to the need to focus anew on the extinction threat of nuclear war, famed Vietnam War whistleblower and high-level nuclear planner, the late Daniel Ellsberg, made clear in his 2017 work *The Doomsday Machine* that extinction by nuclear war is as great and probable a threat as during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union when the world was much more focused on it:

'The hidden reality … is that for over 50 years, all-out thermonuclear war – an irreversible, unprecedented, and almost unimaginable calamity for civilization and most life on earth … [was and remains] a catastrophe waiting to happen.

'No policies in human history have more deserved to be recognised as immoral. Or insane. The story of how this calamitous predicament came about and how and why it has persisted for over half a century is a chronicle of human madness.'

The madness Ellsberg describes has not ended. Two extinction threats arising from war exist and are growing today – and both are subject to continued denial. This is, in itself, madness, since denying the threats undercuts the ability to respond to them.

The first major threat is the view that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 have dramatically reduced the chance of a global nuclear war destroying life on the planet. This is an illusion partly because the Cold War has not completely ceased. The rivalry and tensions between the United States and Russia are evolving into a New Cold War, arguably more dangerous than the old one. Indeed, the growing competition and hostility between the United States and China is seen by several observers as eerily parallel to the Cold War between the United States and Russia.

The New Cold War can be seen in geopolitical rivalries and the breakdown or weakening of nuclear arms agreements that could quickly escalate political and military tensions in US-Russia relations and, potentially, between the United States and China. The US media and national security apparatus focus increasingly on the 'China threat', a major security theme of the Trump and Biden administrations.

This could bring the United States into conflict with Russia and China around East Asian and global economic and military security matters. In 2021, the Biden administration hit both Russia and China with sanctions for cyber hacking that signalled a hardening of conflicts with these nuclear rivals, both of which could escalate into extremely perilous military conflicts.

A multitude of other conflicts pit the United States against other Russian allies that could inflame the US-Russian relationship, including conflicts in Iran, Venezuela, Crimea, Cuba and Syria.

Moreover, border disputes between Eastern European and Baltic nations and Russia, disputes over the existence and purpose of NATO, and conflict over international trade are all dangerous issues that pit Russia and the United States against each other. These issues could escalate into a more severe crisis and war.

The depth of the New Cold War thinking became evident, ironically, when the Democratic Party and many liberal media elites in the US, including progressive MSNBC hosts such as Rachel Maddow, attacked former President Donald Trump for 'going soft' on Russia. The larger hidden story told by even more liberal news outlets is that Russia is a hostile, aggressive and expansionary enemy of the United States and the 'free world'. Defining Russia this way appeared to be how anti-Trumpists of all partisan persuasions felt they could gain legitimacy because it was the foreign policy bedrock view of the national security apparatus and the public.

The extinction threat invisibly grows as both political parties in the United States embrace the story of Russia's antagonism and dangerousness. Nuclear crises could escalate in the South China Sea and East Asia, where China and Russia tend to be allied in opposing US military and economic dominance. But the dangers of escalation and war with Russia could quickly emerge in places like Iran, where Russia (and nuclear China) both support Tehran. They may try to resist military provocations by the United States.

Perhaps an even more significant nuclear threat lies on the Russia border, where Cold War tensions and NATO expansion have always been fuel for a significant firestorm between the United States and Russia. This began with the US breaking its 1990 promise to the former President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev not to advance NATO 'one inch closer' to the Russian border.

This pledge was made in return for Gorbachev's acceptance of a unified Germany aligned with the United States and Western Europe. The nuclear extinction threat is particularly dangerous and growing, as the US seeks to deploy new nuclear and anti-ballistic weapons near the Russian border, partly in the name of a growing threat of border expansion by the Kremlin in Ukraine.

Between 2016 and 2019, the Trump administration essentially tore up the major nuclear arms agreements that appeared to be stabilising the Russian-American nuclear relationship. President Joe Biden upped the ante by approving and funding further new 'small' tactical or battlefield nukes, most likely to trigger a nuclear exchange on the Russian border.

President Biden has taken a far more adversarial stance towards Russia than Trump did, especially on issues ranging from Russian expansion of its borders to the suspected US cyberattack on the Russian gas pipeline to Russia's trade deals with the Europeans.

In 1963, the Cuban missile crisis made the spectre of nuclear war an immediate threat. Anyone old enough to remember this also remembers the folly of 'duck and cover' drills that falsely promised protection from a nuclear holocaust. It was only because of diplomacy and a robust anti-nuclear movement that that threat receded for decades. Today, rampant militarism and leaders willing to take a chance on the fate of the world for economic advantage have, once again, ramped up the risk of nuclear annihilation.

As of 23 January 2024, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has set the Doomsday Clock to 90 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to a nuclear disaster. Our leaders now play a cynical game of 'duck and cover' with the truth. ◆

This excerpt is adapted from Dying for Capitalism: How Big Money Fuels Extinction and What We Can Do About It *by Charles Derber and Suren Moodliar (Routledge, 2023), and produced by Earth | Food | Life, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

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US attacks on the ICJ are a declaration of empire

Washington's criticism of the International Court of Justice – which has provisionally ruled that Israel is plausibly committing genocide in Gaza – must be seen as part of a broader effort to unfetter any restraints on US power.

Stephen Zunes

ON 26 January, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a ruling that it had found evidence making a plausible case that Israel was violating its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in its war on the civilian population of the besieged Gaza Strip. It demanded Israel 'take all measures within its power ... with immediate effect' to prevent all acts within the scope of the Genocide Convention. It demanded that Israel issue a report within 30 days regarding their compliance and punish those who are explicitly advocating genocide. The judges voted in favour of these demands by votes of 15–2 and 16–1. This opinion is legally binding.

Genocide is one of those rare terms where the legal definition is broader than the popular understanding. It does not just include systematic mass extermination, such as the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide or the 1994 Rwandan genocide, but also military campaigns 'committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group'. Recent examples would include the Guatemalan junta's campaign against Indigenous peoples in the highlands during the 1980s, Sudan's war in Darfur, the attacks by Bosnian Serbs against Bosnian Muslims, Serbia's war on Kosovo, Iraqi and Turkish campaigns against the Kurds, and US designation of 'free fire zones' in rebel-held areas of Vietnam.

Israel's indiscriminate military assault on crowded civilian areas on the Gaza Strip, the most destructive bombardment over a comparable time period in any war this century, would appear to meet such a definition.

Despite this, the Biden administration and congressional leaders in the US have categorically denounced South Africa for submitting the application to the ICJ and the court for considering it. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence presented in the application submitted by the South Africans, US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby insisted that 'the submission is meritless, counterproductive, and completely without any basis in fact whatsoever'. By contrast, there had been no objections raised over the concurrent application by Gambia accusing Burma of genocide for its war on the Rohingya or disagreements with previous genocide cases before the ICJ.

Similarly, a bipartisan group of over 200 members of the US House of Representatives signed a letter communicating their 'disgust' at the filing, claiming – without even responding to the detailed documentation of war crimes that amount to genocide contained in the South African presentation – that it somehow 'perpetrates false and dangerous allegations against the Jewish state'. The letter falsely claimed that it 'barely acknowledged' the Hamas terrorist attack of 7 October.

Even though the ICJ ruling largely confirmed South Africa's claims, the US State Department doubled down, insisting, 'We continue to believe that allegations of genocide are unfounded.'

While the Biden administration has stridently objected to the ICJ reviewing evidence of genocide, it has also acknowledged that it has not conducted any formal assessment as to whether Israel is indeed in contravention of the genocide treaty or is otherwise violating international humanitarian law. Kirby acknowledged, 'I'm not aware of any kind of formal assessment being done by the United States government to analyse the compliance with international law by our partner Israel', adding, 'We have not seen anything that would convince us that we need to take a different approach in terms of trying to help Israel defend itself.'

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller, when pressed by reporters as to how the administration concluded that Israel was not violating the treaty, responded by saying he would not discuss any internal deliberations.

Matthew Duss of the Center for International Policy noted that 'the administration issued an assessment of Russian war crimes within a month of the Ukraine invasion. The US has far more visibility into Israeli operations, so the claim that they've not been able to make such an assessment about Gaza after three months really strains credulity'.

A 16 January vote in the Senate to enact a provision in US foreign assistance law that requires the State Department to examine the human rights practices of governments receiving US aid with regard to possible Israeli war crimes was defeated by a 72–11 bipartisan majority.

The International Court of Justice

The ICJ has its origins in the Permanent International Court, established in The Hague, Netherlands, in 1920. Since the founding of the United Nations in 1945, the ICJ – also known as the World Court – has functioned as the judicial arm of the UN system. Designed to better enable nations to settle their disputes non-violently, the ICJ has been used by Washington on a number of occasions to advance US foreign policy interests ranging from fishing disputes with Canada to the seizure of American hostages by Iran.

The ICJ is a separate body from the International Criminal Court (ICC), also located in The Hague, which was established in 2002 to prosecute individuals for war crimes when national courts are unable or unwilling to do so. The United States has refused to ratify the ICC treaty; it has also pressured other nations to reject it, demanded special exemption from the ICC's authority, and raised strong objections to an ongoing ICC investigation into Israeli war crimes. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken claims that the ICC seeks 'to target Israel unfairly', even though the investigation also includes war crimes by Hamas and the ICC is also investigating more than a dozen other ongoing conflicts.

Although the United States has expressed hostility towards the ICC, the Biden administration is assisting in the gathering of evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

Despite the United States' key role in the development of international humanitarian law, and despite the fact that the ICJ has more often than not ruled in favour of the United States and its allies, recent decades have seen increasing American hostility towards any legal constraints upon US foreign policy.

In 1986, for example, the ICJ – in a 14–1 vote with only the American judge dissenting – called for the United States to cease its attacks against Nicaragua, both directly and through its proxy army of Nicaraguan exiles known as the FDN (or 'Contras'), who were notorious for their attacks against civilian targets. The court also ruled that the United States had to pay the Nicaraguan government more than $2 billion in compensation for the damage inflicted upon the country's civilian infrastructure. The Reagan administration refused to comply with either directive and withdrew the United States from compulsory jurisdiction of the World Court. No subsequent president has re-committed the United States to its authority.

Similarly, in 1996, the World Court voted that the United States and other nuclear powers were legally bound by provisions of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty – signed and ratified by the United States and all but a handful of the world's nations – to take serious steps to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. The Clinton administration refused to comply, and Congress continues to approve White House requests for funding the development and procurement of new nuclear weapons systems.

In an advisory opinion in 2004, also by a 14–1 vote with only the US judge dissenting, the court ruled that while Israel, like any country, could construct a separation barrier along its internationally recognised border, it could not build it in a serpentine manner deep inside the occupied West Bank in order to incorporate illegal settlements into Israel. The decision was roundly condemned by both the Bush administration and by Democratic presidential nominee and future Secretary of State John Kerry, who claimed that it was a 'political' decision that denied Israel's right to self-defence. The US House of Representatives, by a 361–45 majority, passed a resolution deploring the decision.

What upset Bush, Kerry and Congress is that the ICJ, in its advisory opinion, noted that all nations 'are under an obligation not to recognise the illegal situation arising from the construction of the wall, and not to render aid or assistance in maintaining that situation'.

Attacks on the ICJ and ICC appear to be part of a broader effort to undermine and discredit the UN system.

Part of the hostility to the 2004 opinion was the court's insistence that every country that is party to the Fourth Geneva Convention must 'ensure compliance by Israel with international humanitarian law as embodied in that Convention'.

It could be assumed that Washington might react in a similar hostile manner should the court rule favourably on South Africa's claim of genocide.

Any such strict and uniform application of international law would interfere with US policy objectives in the region, which rely heavily on the use of military force. This is why any attempt to enforce international humanitarian law must be met by slander, condemnation and other attacks against the credibility of the international organisations daring to suggest that the United States and its allies are not somehow exempt from such legal obligations.

Attacks on the ICJ and ICC appear to be part of a broader effort to undermine and discredit the UN system. International law and intergovernmental organisations are seen by both Republicans and Democrats as interfering with the prerogatives of the US government and its allies in strategically important areas like the Middle East. Given the overwhelming military dominance of the United States globally and allies such as Israel regionally, international legal institutions are among the few potential restraints on the unfettered exertion of American power.

As a result, the bipartisan attacks should not be seen simply as 'pro-Israel' sentiment, particularly in light of the long-term detrimental impact on Israeli security if Israel continues its current policies. Instead, Washington's unified hostility must be viewed as part of a broader effort to undermine international law in order to give the United States free rein in pursuing its policy objectives in the Middle East and beyond.

These attacks against the World Court by both Republicans and Democrats are not simply an endorsement of the dangerous and illegal policies of a right-wing ally. They are, in effect, a declaration of empire. If such policies go unchallenged, Palestinians will certainly not be the only ones who will suffer. ◆

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Indigenous leaders saved Guatemala's fragile democracy

More than a hundred days of Indigenous-led protest played a key role in defending Guatemala's democracy, but the struggle continues.

Jeff Abbott

Waging Nonviolence/Jeff Abbott

An Indigenous woman holding up a staff, the symbol of Indigenous governance, during a march to support the presidential inauguration of Bernardo Arévalo.

GUATEMALA City's Central Plaza was a sea of cautious optimism on 14 January. But just up the street, a march organised by Indigenous leaders set out to walk towards the plaza as part of the commemoration of the inauguration of Bernardo Arévalo as the country's next president.

The march marked the culmination of the Indigenous-led movement to defend Guatemala's fragile democracy against attempts launched by corrupt politicians to block the ascension of Arévalo to the presidency of the Central American country. He was an academic and diplomat who became a congressional representative and then an anti-corruption presidential candidate in 2023.

Arévalo was inaugurated as the next president of Guatemala just after midnight on 15 January, after nearly 10 hours of delays by conservatives in Guatemala's Congress. His inauguration followed 106 days of protests led by Mayan, Xinka and Garifuna authorities in defence of Guatemala's democracy.

'It's an expression of triumph, of reaching our goal,' said Alida Vicente, who participated in the protest and is a lawyer and member of the Mayan Poqomam Ancestral Authorities of Palin, Escuintla. 'I think that many of us even celebrated it more than the officials themselves. Our dedication was total – day and night, rain and hunger – and after reaching the goal, it is a feeling of success.'

She added, 'Honestly, if there had not been an uprising of the people, Arévalo would not have taken office.'

Others involved in the mobilisation to protect democracy expressed the same.

'We feel very satisfied with the work we did,' said Jorge González, a member of the Mayan Achi Ancestral Authorities of Rabinal, Baja Verapáz. 'Because really the work had the greatest fruit, that Arévalo was able to take office.'

In his first act as president, Arévalo visited an encampment, set up outside of the attorney-general's office in early October, to address the Indigenous leaders. He recognised their critical role in the defence of democracy, and thanked them for their efforts.

'There were 106 days of resistance, of dignity, of gallantry,' Arévalo told the Indigenous leaders around 2 a.m. on 15 January. 'And today they are ending with a democratic government that you have managed to rescue.'

In his statement he also called on the Indigenous leaders and other Guatemalan citizens to continue to be vigilant.

Leaders from Indigenous communities across the country mobilised to defend the fragile democratic order as attempts to undermine the results of the 2023 elections increased, in what Arévalo referred to as an attempted electoral coup. In October the protests exploded, with tens of thousands of people from across the social stratum – including students, market workers and poor neighbourhoods – joining the Indigenous leaders in the defence of democracy. They demanded the resignation of Attorney-General María Consuelo Porras for her part in the attacks on President-elect Arévalo and voiced their direct support for the democratic process to a national audience.

'This is something that exploded,' González said. 'It is an example of the great work of organising at the national level that all these towns went out to protest the same day, and then from there the other towns joined in. Then it reached a point where everyone went out to the capital city where they never go out to demonstrate.'

Waging Nonviolence/Jeff Abbott

Mayan spiritual guides conducting a ceremony in October outside the public prosecutor's office demanding the resignation of the attorney-general.

Attempts to derail Arévalo

The lead-up to the 25 June general elections had been marked by concern, as popular candidates were arbitrarily barred from running for office by the country's Supreme Electoral Tribunal, including presidential candidate Thelma Cabrera, who is Mam Mayan, of the Movement for the Liberation of the Peoples party.

The prohibition of candidates who were considered to be threats to the status quo led many to believe that the elections were being cleared for far-right candidates, such as Zury Rios, the daughter of former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, or centre-right ex-diplomat Edmund Mulet.

But to the surprise of everyone, the results of the general elections would launch Arévalo into a run-off against the rightward-shifting Sandra Torres, an increasingly conservative businesswoman and former first lady who ran for the presidency in the previous two elections. While Arévalo had been polling in eighth place before the 25 June vote, widespread exhaustion with corruption and the status quo catapulted the progressive candidate into the run-off.

However, the challenges began just as the surprise in the elections set in.

Between 12 July and 14 January, the public prosecutor's office launched at least five different attempts to intervene in the electoral process. These attempts included judges issuing orders to suspend Arévalo's Movimiento Semilla party in July; raids of Movimiento Semilla's offices and the offices of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, seizing documents and official vote tallies; requesting that the Supreme Court strip Arévalo, Vice President Karin Herrara and other party members of their immunity over allegations of stoking student movement protests; and the far-right casting doubts of electoral fraud.

Indigenous communities mobilise to defend democracy

Indigenous Ancestral Authorities were at the forefront of the defence of democracy from the beginning of the attacks against the historic victory, issuing legal challenges and supporting the democratic order. Indigenous leaders contributed to marches through July, but there were increasingly arbitrary attacks in August and September by prosecutors seeking to derail the transition of power, leading to threats of massive nationwide protests.

'A legal strategy [was pursued] to stop the coup,' Vicente said. 'However, none of that worked for us. There was no reason why these people would abide by the popular and sovereign will of the people.'

In response to this, on 5 September, a group of Ancestral Authorities and spiritual guides that represent smaller communities, including Vicente, began a series of actions known as Xik'a'y in the Mayan K'iche languages, in order to publicly punish those corrupt officials who had attacked the democratic process. Vicente and the other authorities and spiritual guides travelled between the buildings of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the presidential palace and congress carrying a vinyl sign with the images of the officials involved in the coup, hitting them with tree branches. They continued to carry out these ceremonies every 13 days.

Other calls for mobilisations to defend democracy moved through social media and networks of Ancestral Authorities across the country, from the leaderships of the larger communal government of the 48 Cantones of Totonicapán and Indigenous Municipality of Sololá. These calls culminated in the arrival of Indigenous authorities in Guatemala City and the blocking of the Inter-American highway passing through Totonicapán on 2 October.

Propagated by social media, roadblocks quickly spread across the country, and lasted for nearly two weeks. Some roadblocks faced violence by criminal groups, and one person was killed by a group associated with a local mayor. The Minister of the Interior resigned because he refused to use force against protesters. Within a week there were over 150 roadblocks across the country and in neighbourhoods across Guatemala City before subsiding to focus on the mobilisations outside the public prosecutor's office.

The encampment outside the public prosecutor's office brought in support from across the city. For 106 days it grew as more people arrived to support the efforts of the Ancestral Authorities, who held Mayan ceremonies just outside the gate of the building.

Delegations from Indigenous communities arrived daily; so did donations of food and water. Each day there were people walking around donating fruit or fresh cooked meals. Medics set up medical centres to provide care and musicians held concerts to entertain those who were demanding the resignation of the attorney-general and demanding respect for the results of the 2023 elections.

González says that these protests benefited from social media such as TikTok, Facebook and X, as well as reports from independent media that circulated on these social media. 'The digital platforms that exist today had a lot of influence,' he said. 'They showed people what was being done and [allowed] for each person to join the struggle.'

These efforts were further supported by actions by the international community, with the United States and the European Union approving visa restrictions and sanctions against those involved in undermining the democratic order.

On 17 January, just days after the transition, the US Department of State announced that they had stripped outgoing Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei of his visa over acts of corruption. Giammattei had refused to be in attendance to hand over power to Arévalo on 15 January.

What lies ahead

The defence of Guatemala's democracy does not end with Arévalo taking office.

The attacks on democracy continue, with Attorney-General Porras and the other members of the corrupt status quo remaining in positions of power. But those who defended democracy over the last six months will be poised to defend what space has been won.

Rather, this marks the beginning of a larger movement. For Indigenous leaders, there is hope that Arévalo will be more inclusive and combat the systemic racism against Indigenous peoples and their Indigenous forms of local governance.

'Right now the first phase ends, but the second phase begins,' said González ahead of the march on 14 January, explaining that they must accompany the new government while at the same time analysing the new administration's policies. He emphasised, 'We hope it will lead to combating discrimination and racism.'

It will be a challenge to combat those structures, as Guatemala has seen these systems embedded in the state.

'We are going to have to work to ensure that the state of Guatemala responds to the priorities and needs of the people,' Vicente said. 'But that is not easy. This state has been designed with a racist colonial view and modifying all this is something that involves rooting out and transforming the structure at the service of the mafias.'

But there is a sense of hope that Arévalo can begin the change, as he has sought to uphold and respect Indigenous communities. He first did so by recognising their key leadership in the defence of democracy, and then he became the first Guatemalan president to participate in a public Mayan ceremony following his inauguration.

In the end, the defence of Guatemala's fragile democracy is the result of 'people's desire for change', Vicente said.

As the new government begins, Indigenous leaders like González and Vicente are still going to remain active in the defence of democracy and continuing to demand the resignation of Attorney-General Porras. For González, recuperating the state institutions is the first step in fighting the systemic corruption that has left so many Indigenous communities in a state of abandonment.

'First we need to recover the institution of justice because from there it covers the entire fight against corruption,' González said. 'If there is no independent justice system, there is no fight against corruption and impunity, nor are there improvements regarding the rights of Indigenous peoples.'

He added, 'We are going to achieve this together.' ◆

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Argentina wants to whitewash its military junta. Unfortunately, there's video evidence

A new documentary about the trial of the military junta leaders who brutally ruled Argentina in 1976–83 is a powerful rejoinder to attempts at rewriting this terrible episode in the country's history.

Juliet Jacques

This piece was originally published by Novara Media.

IN November, Argentina elected far-right candidate Javier Milei as president. During his campaign, Milei – who would often brandish a chainsaw when talking about his plans for the state, and when telling citizens to 'be careful not to become a communist' – downplayed the number 'disappeared' and killed by the notorious military junta that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983, insisting that there were not 30,000 victims, as has widely been stated over the last 40 years, but 8,753. Two months earlier, his vice-president, the arch-conservative Victoria Villaruel, held a vigil for 'victims of leftist terror' in the years before the junta seized power, which had to be heavily policed amidst large counter-protests.

Though perhaps par for the course for Milei, whose antics had earned him the nickname El Loco (the Crazy One), to many this was the final straw. The proud claim that the trial of the junta paved the way for Argentina not just to become but to remain a democracy, surviving even the economic collapse of 2001, has never looked in such peril.

On 18 June 1982, General Leopoldo Galtieri – the third dictator of Argentina's military junta since the coup d'état of 1976

Pictures of *desaparecidos* – victims of forced disappearance – in Argentina.

– received a letter from the army high command demanding his resignation. Amidst the loss of the Falklands War, plummeting real wages and a decline in GDP, Galtieri knew the jig was up: the National Reorganisation Process, as the junta called itself, had run its course. He stood down, soon followed by his entire cabinet.

Galtieri's successor, General Reynaldo Bignone, restored to Argentinians limited rights to assembly and free speech, and announced that an election would be held in March 1984. During this two-year interregnum, the military regime destroyed evidence relating to the disappearance of 15–30,000 dissidents, but the cover-up wouldn't last long. In February 1983, Buenos Aires police chief Ramón Camps announced that the 'disappeared' – mostly trade union personnel, academics and students, as well as people involved in left-wing parties and guerilla organisations – had been killed, forcing Bignone to acknowledge the slaughter and announce an amnesty for its perpetrators, himself included.

Following widespread protests, the election was brought forward to December 1983. The liberal Radical Civic Union (UCR) party won. It established a democratic National Congress, overturned Bignone's amnesty and in 1985 organised the *juicio a las juntas* (trial of the juntas): the first and still the only time that those responsible for establishing such a murderous regime were put on trial and condemned in their own country.

Over 90 days, 833 witnesses testified against nine former military officers, including the coup's leader and first president Jorge Videla, his successor Roberto Viola and Galtieri. They spoke of mass killings, rape, torture, the kidnapping of adults and babies. The generals insisted that their 'dirty war' was a justified response to 'leftist terror'. Argentina's national commission on the disappearance of persons produced a 50,000-page report that became known as Nunca Más (Never Again), which, along with the testimonies, formed the basis of the prosecution's case.

Incredibly, the trial was recorded in its entirety, but only very short clips of it were broadcast during news programmes in 1985, without sound, with the trial being contentious in itself, and the events discussed in the courtroom still so raw and sensitive.

Since then, the U-matic tapes have sat in a Spanish archive, never to be seen again – that is, until Ulises de la Orden accessed them, and edited 530 hours of footage down to 177 minutes to make one of the most compelling political documentaries of the 21st century.

El Juicio ('The Trial'), de la Orden's 10th film, boils down the drama to its essence: district attorney Julio César Strassera, the survivors, the generals and their lawyers, and five judges. Besides separating the film into acts, the title of each drawn verbatim from courtroom dialogue, de la Orden adds no commentary or indeed any other sound to the footage, which may look dated, having clearly been shot on videotape, but still feels raw and urgent.

In the context of Milei's historical revisionism, 'The Trial' serves as a timely reminder of just how horrific the junta (and, by extension, US-backed regimes across South America) actually was, and how the dehumanisation of the left paved the way for it.

Mídia NINJA (CC BY 4.0)

During his election campaign, Argentine President Javier Milei *(pic)* downplayed the number 'disappeared' and killed by the military junta that ruled between 1976 and 1983.

The defendants start – much like Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu in Romania four years later – by questioning the court's legitimacy and objectivity, right down to the seating arrangements. They argue it is unconstitutional to 'judicialise a political matter', and that the judge and jury are not qualified to replace the supreme council of the armed forces. They dispute the term 'war criminals', presenting themselves as victims of a show trial or, as they put it, 'another Nuremberg, but in reverse' and a 'Marxist-Leninist … inquisition'.

The court adjourns, then hears from Ítalo Lúder, who deputised for Isabel Perón as head of state immediately before the coup. Lúder issued executive orders allowing the army free rein in attacking leftist 'subversion' – especially the People's Revolutionary Army, founded to fight the military regime of 1966–73. When the defence suggests that the junta was simply carrying out Lúder's orders, he insists this did not mean to 'physically annihilate them or violate the legal structure'. Was the military regime, then, a continuation of the existing order, or an aberration? Is the trial aiming to set boundaries around what is considered excessive force, and what is seen as simply necessary to protect the established order? If it is, then who is implicated, how, and why?

With the new democratic government hoping to distance itself from both Isabel Perón's rule and the juntas, the ramifications of these questions are partially explored in a discussion of 'the subversion of the state'. The prosecution says the radicals killed either before or after the coup were entitled to a legal process, in response to the generals' only real argument, that their actions were justified in quelling left-wing insurgency – and an important part of the US-backed dirty war, Operation Condor, across South America.

After establishing the necessity of defending 'the Argentine people' and 'the Republic', one of the defendants says they are on trial 'because we won the armed war but lost the psychological war', asking: 'Which side were my accusers on? Were they hoping the repressors would win?'

Democratic institutions are cast as the enemy, captured by the extreme left: the need to defeat it by whatever means necessary is questioned less than whether the 'disappeared' fell into that category. But this becomes less relevant as the witnesses recount the regime's methods in horrifying detail. This isn't really about the 'banality of evil' so famously discussed by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: it is not the whole society, through an emblematic figure, on trial for establishing and sustaining a barbaric society, but a small number of people for extraordinary abuses of power.

We hardly see the witnesses – the television cameras shot them from behind, perhaps to avoid reprisal – but we do see plenty of the defence looking blank or aggrieved, smiling at each other or shaking hands with people making their way to the galleries. This may sound like it could foster identification with the accused. With the sheer number of witnesses, the abuses they recall and shots of weeping mothers, this feeling quickly evaporates.

We hear about students being massacred for demanding bus passes; about Nazis who fled to Argentina after 1945, influencing the regime's tactics and bolstering its virulent antisemitism; about how the junta used the 1978 football World Cup, the hosting of which had been awarded to Argentina before the coup, as a propaganda tool while running concentration camps within earshot of the Buenos Aires stadium where Argentina won the final. We hear from Robert Cox, the English editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald* who initially thought that 'through dictatorship, we might get to democracy', but soon had the junta calling his office to suppress discussion of the disappearances, insisting that anyone arrested was 'a terrorist'. We hear about menacing calls being made to the prosecution lawyers' offices and see the court adjourn when tensions spill over into personal animosity.

The film builds to a crescendo with district attorney Strassera's closing speech. Referring to the seventh circle of hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy* in which 'tyrants lament their pitiless mischiefs', and asserting the need to restore the juridical principles established in Argentina's constitution, Strassera insists: 'We have a responsibility to build a peace based not on forgetfulness but on memory; not on violence but on justice.' The phrase 'Nunca Más' belongs to the Argentine people, he says, closing to rapturous applause and tears from the gallery.

The sentences are presented in an epilogue before we see them being pronounced by the judge. Videla and Emilio Massera, seen as the mastermind of the dirty war, were given life imprisonment. The coup's other leader, Orlando Ramón Agosti, got four years and six months. Viola received 17 years, with other leaders of the second junta getting less than 10. Galtieri and the heads of the third junta, Jorge Anaya and Basilio Lami Dozo, who voluntarily stood down, were acquitted. In 2005, the left-leaning president Néstor Kirchner overturned the impunity laws passed by Carlos Menem's government in the late 1980s, and more than 1,000 people eventually went to prison for their role in the regime, with a further 1,000 dying while on trial.

At a screening in London last year, I asked de la Orden about the balance of prosecution evidence and defence testimony in his edit, and if he considered including more of the latter. Their arguments, he said, barely went beyond undermining the legitimacy of the trial and repeating that 'we had to crush the left'. In the absence of documentary evidence, the trial focused on the witnesses, making sure they formed the historical record. De la Orden grants them similar dignity, reminding us of that record and making it accessible to new audiences, reinforcing Strassera's conclusion, without passing explicit judgement on the process.

That the junta's actions were atrocities will be self-evident to almost anyone who watches 'The Trial'. But what happens if a consensus cannot hold? What if a consensus is based on memories that last only a generation or two?

Such memory lapse poses a substantial threat to countries that consider themselves bastions of democracy, having supposedly reckoned with their fascist past – countries like Argentina or Germany, where the ascendant AfD party has long been calling for the country to rewrite its Nazi history. Meanwhile, the endless turmoil in Italy, from Operation Gladio and the Years of Lead to Berlusconi's debasing combination of media, spectacle and politics, and subsequent electoral drift ever rightwards to the Lega Nord and Brothers of Italy, shows what can happen when there isn't a serious reckoning with history.

The work of sustaining democracy isn't just keeping alive the memory of dictatorship, an increasingly ineffective bastion against far-right forces seeking to harness liberal democracy in order to destroy it. For that history not to be repeated, we need societies where movements against inequality and poverty are not suppressed.

If they are, the likes of Milei and Villaruel – who have convinced a worrying number of people that the atrocities of the past were exaggerated – will be able to organise unchecked, with a long-term view to reviving their predecessors' projects and making their countries less democratic. By bringing the testimonies of those censored or tortured, of those whose loved ones 'disappeared', back to the surface, in a film that vividly conveys the full horrors of the dirty war, de la Orden resists this revisionism and, one hopes, does a little to ensure such atrocities never happen again. ◆

Juliet Jacques is a writer, filmmaker, broadcaster and academic. This article is reproduced from Novara Media (novaramedia.com).

Navigating climate change and menopause

For some of India's mostly women community health workers, the uncomfortable experience of menopause is compounded by job stress, social stigma – and climate change.


Sanket Jain

An October 2021 protest by ASHA community health workers demanding an increase in pay, better working conditions and the status of full-time workers. ASHAs are typically overburdened and many operate in stifling weather conditions.

Sanket Jain

IT took 49-year-old community healthcare worker Netradipa Patil two years to realise that she had stopped pursuing her hobby. Despite being surrounded by several psychology and mental health books, she hadn't read them.

'My day would start with household chores, followed by stepping out in the scorching heat to survey my community and help people access public healthcare,' she tells the Equal Times website.

Patil is an accredited social health activist (ASHA), one of the one million, mostly female community healthcare workers employed under India's National Rural Health Mission to make public healthcare accessible to people in India's rural villages. She would spend over six hours on foot walking from client to client, only to return home completely drained. ASHAs are typically overburdened with more than 70 healthcare tasks like providing medicines for common ailments, providing ante- and post-natal care, and ensuring the timely immunisation of infants and children.

Regardless of feeling tired, she says she found it difficult to fall asleep. Patil was undergoing the menopause, where women – usually over the age of 40 – see an end to their periods due to lower levels of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. Symptoms can vary from vaginal dryness to mood swings, hot flushes, brain fog, reduced libido and more. 'The night sweats would wake me almost daily,' she recalls.

With a disturbed schedule, followed by another tiring day at work, her health began deteriorating. 'I knew going through menopause wouldn't be easy, but this wasn't normal either,' she says.

'I never felt so stressed and anxious. I felt like giving up and running away,' remembers Patil, who started experiencing the menopause in early 2020.

Patil, a resident of Kolhapur district in India's Maharashtra state, kept at it, but when she first experienced hot flashes while surveying her community, she couldn't understand what was happening. While hot flashes are experienced by more than 80% of women during menopause, what many women – like Patil – all over the world are experiencing are aggravated symptoms, which they attribute to the changes in climatic patterns.

Rising temperatures

While scant research has been carried out on how climate change impacts the menopause, a paper published in late 2023 by researchers from the University of Pavia in Italy mentioned: 'The increase in average and extreme temperatures may modulate the manifestation of vasomotor symptoms (VMS); in particular, environmental temperature and seasonality may affect hot flushes and night sweats.' By 2025, over a billion women will have experienced the menopause, and their individual experiences are often ignored or sidelined. Given how under-researched menopause is, we are yet to see what impact rising global temperatures will have on women, particularly for the 47% of women participating in the global labour force. But limited research and anecdotal feedback suggest that 'pollution and menopause may contribute to specific women's health vulnerabilities' such as cardiovascular and metabolic conditions.

Employers 'slow to recognise menopause as an issue'

After working throughout the 2019 floods and helping thousands of people to continue to access healthcare, Patil realised her life wasn't the same anymore. 'I used to be bursting with happiness,' she shares. 'That changed quite rapidly.' She would quickly get agitated. Meanwhile, during the end of 2020, her health deteriorated to the point where she was hospitalised for a week with a viral infection.

She tried sharing her problems with her supervisors, but they ignored her. 'We feel helpless and keep thinking that no one understands our problems, which stresses us further,' shares Patil.

The problems faced by menopausal women in the workplace or even at their homes aren't restricted to India. Rhianydd Williams, equality and policy officer at the Welsh Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the United Kingdom, tells Equal Times: 'Employers, even in workplaces dominated by women workers, have been slow to recognise menopause as an issue, and those going through the menopause might need additional consideration or adjustments. In many cases, menopause is still not recognised as a workplace issue by managers.'

So severe is the problem that Williams adds that many who are going through perimenopause or menopause feel they have to hide their symptoms or only talk about them in a humorous way. 'This means many are unable to access the adjustments they need. In some cases, women report feeling forced to leave the workforce altogether due to a lack of support.'

Patil says that many of India's one-million-plus ASHAs operate in stifling weather conditions as a lot of their work takes place outside. 'While there are guidelines to keep people safe during a heatwave, there's no help for ASHAs,' says Patil. 'We have to keep working, no matter the disaster, and most of the time, we aren't even paid for it.'

Dealing with climatic changes and systemic issues

ASHA Smita Kamble, also from Maharashtra, began experiencing menopausal symptoms this year at the age of 36. 'My periods became irregular with excessive bleeding,' she shares. 'Sometimes, for seven months, I didn't get my period.'

Kamble ignored it until she collapsed while surveying her community. 'The doctor concluded it was premature menopause, and mounting stress could be one of the reasons that led to it,' she says.

After doing some research she learnt that irregular meal timings, followed by tremendous back-breaking work in the scorching heat and recurring stress caused by the climatic disasters, worsened her symptoms.

Most women experience menopause between the ages of 45 and 55. In the long term, premature menopause can lead to dementia, cognitive impairment, osteoporosis, early mortality, mood disorders, coronary heart disease and cardiovascular mortality.

Kamble says she has neither the time nor the money to seek help for the symptoms that she is experiencing. She has been at the forefront of making healthcare accessible in the face of climatic disasters, where she worked almost 12-14 hours daily during the recurring floods, which even destroyed her house. Eventually, the stress started to take a toll.

According to a November 2023 study published by *Menopause: The Journal of The Menopause Society*, stress is directly linked with menopausal symptoms. It also found that 'previously diagnosed depression or anxiety disorder were related to the intensity of menopausal symptoms'.

Kamble tells Equal Times: 'I was so stressed that often my head would ache beyond what I could bear.' She didn't get any time off on the hottest days of the year, which further deteriorated her health. 'The only option for several women like me is to deal with the pain and wait till it goes away,' she shares.

However, the problem doesn't end here. A 2023 study published in *The Lancet* found that higher levels of air pollutants are associated with bone damage in postmenopausal women. It found exposure to nitrogen oxides as a leading contributor to bone loss in postmenopausal women.

Several trade unions around the world, including Wales TUC, have developed a toolkit on building menopause-friendly workplaces. Talking about solutions for menopausal outdoor workers, Williams suggests 'improving the welfare facilities by providing cold water, shading, sunscreen, cool rooms as needed, weather-related contract terms, changes in the shift patterns to avoid heat extremes'.

Confronting menopause stigma

When Patil experienced menopause, she found it difficult to talk to anyone about it. This was not because she was hesitant, but 'talking about it is considered a taboo', she says. Whenever she got anxious or irritated, her worries were dismissed as 'overthinking'.

'There are no counselling facilities for menopausal healthcare workers,' says Patil. 'The only thing we are told is to take rest and medicines. As if only doing that will solve the problem,' she says dryly. Moreover, Patil found that she knew nothing about menopause, which was also true of many of her colleagues.

M. Sivakami, a professor at the

School of Health Systems Studies at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, tells Equal Times: 'A lot of the stress that women go through stems from the stigma associated with menstruation. Because of this, a significant proportion of women who experience drastic or heavy bleeding cannot talk to the men in the family.'

'In Indian society, many of the men are decision-makers. As a result, many women cannot seek treatment for their menopausal symptoms.'

Starting conversations

Patil, a union leader with ASHA va Gatpravartak Karamchari Sanghatana (ASHA Workers' and Supervisors' Union, in English), also found this during her fieldwork. So, she decided to help other ASHAs by normalising conversations around the menopause. First, she began reading more about menopause before reaching out to various doctors for solutions. Some told her to drink cold water or use a fan. 'I started sharing these tips with the community women and fellow ASHAs,' she shares. Soon, she began posting information on WhatsApp, which was also seen by several men. 'My goal was not just to educate women, but even involve men because menopause is not just a woman's issue,' she shares.

Patil has been talking to several ASHAs and making them aware of the menopause and how to manage its symptoms. 'It's still a long way before the menopause is a part of everyday conversation. But now, when we talk about menopause, we are seeing more women taking an interest in sharing their experiences, which is a big success.' ◆

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The MST at 40

Gabriela Moncau traces the four-decade-old history of the inspirational movement spearheading the struggle for land, agrarian reform and social transformation in Brazil.

FORTY years ago, in the city of Cascavel (Paraná state), just under 100 people took part in the meeting that gave birth to the longest-running peasant movement in Brazil's history and one of the largest in Latin America. Four decades later, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST, in Portuguese) is in 24 Brazilian states, with 185 cooperatives, 1,900 associations, 120 agro-industries, around 400,000 settled families and another 70,000 living in encampments.

In a simple estimate, according to the national average of 2.79 people per household found by the 2022 Census, at least 1.3 million people are members of and live in territories organised by the MST.

As part of its 40th anniversary, the MST will be holding its 7th National Congress in July, with around 15,000 people expected to attend the event in Brasilia.

The last edition of the event was in 2014, when the movement defined that, in addition to democratising access to land, it is necessary to fight for a different agricultural production model. It was then that it incorporated the word 'popular' into the agrarian reform it defends, making a more forceful claim, for instance, in environmental debates and the defence of agroecology.

At this year's event, the MST will probably bring new topics to its agrarian programme and outline the priorities for the next period, as well as review its 40-year-long history.

Gilvan Oliveira/MST

The MST is the longest-running peasant movement in Brazil's history and one of the largest in Latin America.

'It was born with scars'

For geographer Bernardo Mançano, author of the book *A formação do MST no Brasil* ('The formation of the MST in Brazil', Editora Vozes) and a researcher of the organisation since its beginning, the state and different governments are the institutions that mark the most difficult periods for the movement. In his view, the MST's most critical moment was its birth.

'The MST was born in the midst of a dictatorship [from 1964 until 1985]. It was born with political scars from a process that imprisoned people and took lives. However, it still managed to conquer territories and begin the process of spatialising the struggle for land,' says Mançano.

The foundation for the MST was laid by the struggles for re-democratisation at the turn of the 1970s to the 1980s, with farmers occupying large estates in Rio Grande do Sul state. One of the most iconic was Occupation Encruzilhada Natalino in December 1980, which received great support from the Catholic Church and the local population.

'Those settlers were in a very concrete attempt to survive. They certainly didn't think about what it would become. But looking back at history, it was an innovation in the way of struggling for land in Brazil: the occupation with a black tarpaulin,' says Ceres Hadich, from the national coordination of the MST. 'Encruzilhada Natalino inaugurated a way of thinking about the struggle for agrarian reform and doing politics that would become one of the great hallmarks of the MST,' she summarises.

Gilmar Mauro, also a member of the national coordination, wasn't at the founding meeting of the MST in 1984 but joined the movement the following year when he turned 18. Born in the town of Capanema (Paraná state), a region of small farmers, Gilmar took part in the occupation of Marmelheiro, which became a regularised settlement in 1986.

That was one of the many land occupations the movement carried out in the country's southern region soon after it emerged. Inspired by previous experiences such as the Peasant Leagues and the Landless

Farmers' Movement (Master), the founders of the MST decided that it would have a national scope and three goals: land struggle, agrarian reform and social transformation.

'Later on, people came to understand what the movement meant: it wasn't simply a struggle for land reparations,' Gilmar Mauro points out. 'This is essential because I think that part of the trade union and popular movement in the world made a mistake by separating what it considers an economic struggle from a political struggle[, believing that the] trade union and grassroots movement should be engaged in economic struggle and the party should be engaged in political struggle. A movement that turns to this bias becomes purely economic talk. And a party that has no links to the socio-economic reality of a country becomes a bureaucracy,' he says. 'These are inseparable struggles.'

At their 1st National Congress in January 1985, the landless workers decided to act under the motto 'Land for those who work on it' and 'Occupation is the only solution'. Five months later, 2,500 families took part in 12 occupations of unproductive estates in Santa Catarina state.

'Right from the start, the movement experimented with cooperative production,' says Ceres. 'Education also plays a fundamental role. We realised we needed to create our own way of educating, to formulate a landless pedagogy, so to speak,' she says, highlighting the experience of the itinerant schools. These are educational spaces with no fixed location that are established within the encampments, being taken down and rebuilt whenever the community is forced to move.

In 1989, there was an internal debate about the possibility of the movement splitting in two. For Gilmar Mauro, it was a moment when 'the essence of the MST was revealed'. 'Some people argued that there should be a movement of settlers and another of those who didn't have land. The former would go on to demand production, credit, etc. And the MST would continue to fight for land,' he says.

Douglas Mansur/MST

An MST march in 1997 culminated in a gathering of some 100,000 people in Brasilia.

'We decided that we wouldn't split. [We decided] that the MST was one and that, as long as there is a landless family in this country, we are all landless. That was a fundamental hallmark of our history,' says Gilmar.

Violence, reactions and the 'MST boom'

Shortly afterwards, the movement faced its bloodiest decade, but also the one in which it became known throughout Brazil. If violence in the countryside has been present since the beginning of the MST's history, for Ceres, the period between 1995 and 2010 is the one in which the combination of 'state, militia and large real estate is especially evident'.

The Eldorado dos Carajás massacre, which made 17 April the International Day of Struggle for Land, is the most emblematic of these episodes. On the evening of that day in 1996, around 1,500 landless people arrived at the place known as Curva do S, in the southwest region of Pará state. They had been walking for a week and intended to go to the city of Belém to demand that Brazil's National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA, in Portuguese) expropriate a farm. They never arrived there. Surrounded and attacked by 155 military police officers, 21 peasants were murdered and 79 injured.

The commotion over the attack, which was televised, was huge. The debate on agrarian reform dominated the country's political agenda. In 1997, three simultaneous marches called by the MST left from different locations in Brazil and walked for around two months until they arrived in the capital Brasilia, exactly one year after the massacre occurred, in a gathering of around 100,000 people.

'It was historic. But it wasn't the MST that gathered 100,000. It was society that joined in the movement, taking it to a new level,' says Gilmar Mauro.

On 17 April 1997, Sebastião Salgado's photo book *Terra* ('Land'), about the struggle for land, was launched, with an introductory text by Portuguese writer José Saramago and accompanied by a CD by Brazilian singer Chico Buarque. The three artists donated the copyright to the MST, which, with the money raised, built the Florestan Fernandes National School in Guararema, São Paulo state.

Then Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazilian Social Democracy

MST

Participants at the MST's 1st National Congress in 1985.

Party) was pressured to create the Ministry of Agrarian Development (abolished in 2016 by the Temer government and recreated in 2023 by the Lula government). In 1998, as a result of a demand from the MST, the National Programme for Education in Agrarian Reform (PRONERA) was created. Since then, 191,000 young peasants have got into 531 courses in all Brazilian states.

It was during this period after the Eldorado do Carajás massacre that Brazilian TV channel Globo broadcast the soap opera *O Rei do Gado* ('The King of the Cattle'). With a plot about the romance between a landless woman and a big land owner, in Gilmar Mauro's assessment, the soap opera 'intended to tame the MST, appease the conflict. However, it had the opposite effect. It ended up spreading the theme of agrarian reform and the MST nationwide'.

For Gilmar, 1997 was a turning point in the movement. 'We won the cities, especially the universities. Many people joined the movement. There was even a slogan at the time: "Agrarian reform is done in the countryside, but it's won in the city",' he recalls.

Growth, however, has not stopped violence. For Ceres, one of the milestones of the new repression – following the changes in agribusiness since the 2000s, with the boom in commodity exports, transgenics and financialisation – was the death of farmer Valmir Mota de Oliveira, dubbed Keno.

In October 2007, at the age of 34, Keno was murdered by security guards hired by the Swiss transnational company Syngenta. Along with 150 other people from Via Campesina – an international coalition of popular rural movements that the MST is part of – he had been taking part in an occupation in the city of Santa Tereza do Oeste, Paraná state. The protest denounced the illegality of the experiments being carried out in the area by the company, a giant in the transgenic and pesticide sector.

The activists were attacked by 40 armed men from the company NF Segurança. In addition to Keno, farmer Isabel Nascimento de Souza was brought to her knees to be executed. When she was shot, she raised her head and was hit in the right eye. She became blind, but survived. Three other activists were injured. In 2018, Syngenta was condemned by the Paraná Court of Justice.

'The difference with Keno's murder by Syngenta is that we were no longer talking about the violence of the landowner, of the so-called "jagunço". We were talking about a transnational company that is imposing GMOs [genetically modified organisms] on the world, which has its headquarters in Switzerland,' says Ceres. Today, the site where Keno was killed is home to the Valmir Mota de Oliveira Agroecology Research Centre.

Ceres says that the 1990s and 2000s 'revealed the violence of capital and agribusiness and, amid this pain, allowed us to be welcomed by Brazilian society. It made it clear: these are poor rural workers who have nothing, who are in a dignified struggle, and are being beaten up, dying because of it. It was a period that, contradictorily – facing violence and mourning – revealed to society an MST that nobody knew about'.

Towards a new agricultural model

Another turning point for the MST happened in 2014. Agroecology – a model of agriculture based on ecological principles and socially just relations, without the use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides or transgenic seeds – had already been incorporated into the movement since the early 2000s. It was at the last congress, however, that the MST consolidated its understanding that the confrontation with agribusiness is not only a dispute over a piece of land but also a dispute over the model of how to work that land.

'We understand that it doesn't make sense to defend a purely distributist and productivist agrarian reform, in the classical style. But in Brazil, due to the specific conditions, we need to move towards another type of land distribution, but thinking in a different way about ecological issues, production, healthy food and so on,' explains Gilmar Mauro. 'It's a huge leap in quality.'

In 2024, the 7th National Congress should systematise the next leap. 'This is a great expectation,' says Ceres Hadich: 'to get the synthesis right, which will indicate where we're going to go in the coming years.' ◆

This article – translated from the Portuguese by Ana Paula Rocha – is reproduced from the Brasil de Fato website (www.brasildefato.com.br/english/).

TRIBUTE

John Pilger's reporting demolished Western propaganda's myths

The journalism of John Pilger, who passed away on 30 December, laid bare the cynicism and ruthlessness underlying much of global geopolitics.

Daniel Finn


walnut whippet (CC BY 2.0)

John Pilger.

THERE have already been some fine tributes to the Australian journalist John Pilger, who died on 30 December at the age of 84, giving an overview of his career. What I want to do here is offer a more personal perspective on the impact of his work. Pilger's print and broadcast journalism had a very wide distribution over the course of several decades, so my experience of engaging with his work is probably one that many people have shared.

During the 1960s, '70s and '80s, Pilger was a foreign correspondent for the *Daily Mirror*, a mass-circulation UK tabloid with several million readers. He also produced a series of television documentaries that reached a mass audience in Britain.

By the time I was old enough to encounter his journalism, in the late 1990s, Pilger no longer worked for the *Mirror*, although he still contributed articles to publications like *The Guardian* and the *New Statesman*. His appearances on TV were also becoming rarer, so my first point of contact came through his books.

When I was 14, with a keen interest in the world but a very limited base of knowledge, my mother passed on a copy of Pilger's 1986 book *Heroes*, which she had on her shelves. It was a summary of his reporting for the *Mirror* and British TV over the space of two decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Heroes served as a crash course in global history during that period and a devastating retort to the neoliberal, Atlanticist triumphalism that took root after the end of the Cold War. There could be many different routes to the same understanding of the world, but Pilger's book was the one I happened to follow, so I want to give a sense of how revelatory it was.

The Bankstown bee attack

To illustrate what he called 'the fallibility and farce of much of journalism', Pilger started off by recalling one of his first outings for a local newspaper in Sydney at the age of 18. The editorial team received word that a swarm of bees had taken up residency beside someone's car on the high street of Bankstown.

Pilger arrived on the scene and went in for a closer look in search of a better news angle. His only achievement was to hand a rival newspaper its front-page lead: a photo of Pilger himself with the bloodcurdling headline 'BEES TERROR: MAN HURT'.

The Bankstown bee attack story has acquired some extra layers of poignancy since *Heroes* was published. Even in a city as large as Sydney, you are unlikely to find two local newspapers in the contemporary media landscape staffed with enough reporters to cover a suburban bee infestation. Pilger's route into the media as a teenage apprentice straight out of high school is for the most part closed off to would-be journalists today.

Most of *Heroes* covered Pilger's work for the *Mirror* after he moved to London in the early '60s. Pilger reported on some of the key political events in the United States and the UK during that period, from the assassination of Robert Kennedy to the British miners' strike. But his work as a foreign correspondent took him much further afield, to Vietnam and Cambodia, Eritrea and Palestine, El Salvador and Nicaragua, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.

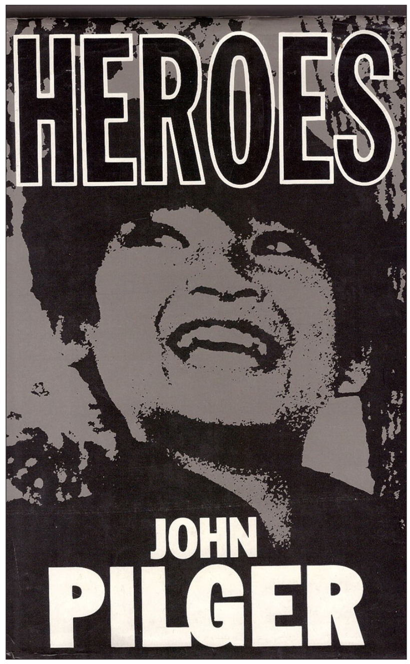
There was a clear political perspective running through these chapters, even though Pilger offered very little discussion of ideology as such. If you wanted a detailed discussion of the big issues that divided the 20th-century left – social democracy versus communism, Joseph Stalin versus Leon Trotsky, the post-Stalin USSR versus Maoist China – you'd have to look elsewhere.

The theory on display in *Heroes* flowed directly from the events that Pilger recounted firsthand. From his perspective, the Cold War had not been a struggle between good and evil, democracy and dictatorship. It was a contest for global influence between two imperial powers that were equally contemptuous of democracy and human rights when it suited their interests.

To back up this argument, the book simply described what the superpowers had been doing and how it affected millions of people around the world during the Cold War. There could be no better illustration of Antonio Gramsci's maxim that telling the truth is a revolutionary act.

Pawns in the game

The tiny African country of Eritrea was emblematic for Pilger. As he pointed out, its independence movement had started off fighting against the US-backed dictatorship of Haile Selassie. Now, in the



Pilger's book *Heroes* is 'a devastating retort to the neoliberal, Atlanticist triumphalism that took root after the end of the Cold War'.

1980s, it had to confront the Soviet-backed dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The planes dropping bombs on guerilla camps came from the USSR instead of the United States, but otherwise very little had changed:

'Of the thirty-four wars fought since 1945, Eritrea's is the only war to which none of the reporter's short-hand labels will stick. "Pro-West", "pro-Soviet", "Marxist", etc.: all are seen to be meaningless because Eritrea's enemies have come at her from over every ideological horizon, from both "imperialist" and "revolutionary" Ethiopia, from both the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective clients, Israel and Cuba. The struggle of this nation of beleaguered people is not only heroic in the classic sense but a negation of the hoary, though still fashionable, Kissinger view that all the world is a chess game in which the small, resource-impoverished nations are pawns and can be moved at will, or declared expendable.'

Pilger was one of the first journalists to go into Cambodia after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge, and his reporting for the *Mirror* had a huge impact on public opinion in Britain. The country's experience was another object lesson in the cynicism of great-power politics. In theory, Pol Pot's movement was the most bloodthirsty offshoot of 20th-century communism, but that didn't stop the governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher from supporting the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s because they were sworn enemies of Vietnam.

Anyone who describes the impact of US foreign policy in Africa, Asia and Latin America during the Cold War is liable to be accused of holding 'anti-American' or 'anti-Western' views, so it's worth stressing that Pilger judged the United States and the USSR by exactly the same moral and political standards. This is an approach that the Reaganite functionary Jeane Kirkpatrick once denounced in bilious terms as 'moral equivalence'.

Pilger travelled undercover behind the Iron Curtain to report on the activity of Czech and Soviet dissidents, which is far more than professional Cold Warriors like Kirkpatrick ever did. But he refused to accept the stultifying ideological framework that presented the United States as a morally superior force in world affairs by its very nature and irrespective of what it actually did.

Once you ditch that framework, comforting morality tales about the Cold War and its various flashpoints collapse like a house of cards. It becomes clear, for example, that the United States invaded Vietnam to prop up a brutal and corrupt dictatorship, employing massive, intentional violence against Vietnamese civilians on a horrifying scale. The purpose of US intervention in El Salvador during the 1980s was to keep another dictatorship in power through the deployment of ruthless and sadistic terror. *Heroes* documented the horrors that Washington inflicted upon these and many other countries in the name of freedom.

Pilger's chapter on Nicaragua

offered a rare moment of optimism. He welcomed the ways in which the Sandinistas had departed from the Soviet model of political transformation: there were no mass executions after the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza's regime, and the new government held free elections in 1984, at a time when the United States was orchestrating a campaign of terrorism by the Contras and Reagan was threatening to launch a full-blown invasion.

By the time I read the book, however, the combination of US sanctions and Contra violence against civilian targets had wrecked the Nicaraguan economy and broken the morale of its people, resulting in victory for a US-backed coalition in the elections of 1990. Within a few years, men like Elliott Abrams and John Negroponte would be applying the skills they had honed on the killing fields of Central America to fresh pastures in the Middle East as part of the 'war on terror'.

The liberation of East Timor

After finishing *Heroes*, I soon worked my way through *Distant Voices* and *Hidden Agendas*, two subsequent books by Pilger that gave a bracingly critical view of global politics at the apogee of US power in the 1990s. *Distant Voices* drew upon Pilger's reporting from East Timor for his 1994 television documentary *Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy*. Nobody could take an honest look at what was being done to the Timorese people and still believe that the world system under US hegemony was based on respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Death of a Nation is an electrifying piece of work. Pilger, who was now in his fifties, made a clandestine journey to East Timor so he could report on the staggering, murderous brutality of Indonesia's occupation, in place since 1975. The United States and its allies, Britain and Australia, did not merely turn a blind eye to the crimes of the Indonesian dictator Suharto. They actively enabled those crimes, supplying Indonesia with the weapons it needed to suppress the Timorese resistance.

At the time when East Timor declared its independence from Portugal in the 1970s, Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger considered Suharto to be a precious ally in a region where they had recently lost several client states, and they were delighted to endorse the invasion of one of Asia's smallest countries. By the 1990s, Western governments could no longer use the Cold War as a threadbare excuse for their complicity with mass murder, but there was no change of policy in Washington, Canberra or London.

As part of the documentary, Pilger conducted an interview with the British Conservative politician Alan Clark, who had approved arms sales to Indonesia as a cabinet minister. Clark was unusually frank about the amorality of his outlook on such matters:

Pilger: Did it bother you personally that this British equipment was causing such mayhem and human suffering?

Clark: No, not in the slightest, it never entered my head. You tell me that this was happening – I didn't hear about it or know about it.

Pilger: Well, even if I hadn't told you it was happening, the fact that we supply highly effective equipment to a regime like that is not a consideration, as far as you're concerned. It's not a personal consideration. I ask the question because I read you are a vegetarian, and you are quite seriously concerned about the way animals are killed.

Clark: Yeah.

Pilger: Doesn't that concern extend to the way humans, albeit foreigners, are killed?

Clark: Curiously not. No.

Death of a Nation was broadcast on ITV, one of Britain's national television networks, and widely distributed in other countries. It had a huge impact on public opinion and helped nurture an international solidarity movement with the Timorese people.

When an independence referendum was held in East Timor after the fall of Suharto, the new Indonesian regime planned to use murderous violence to suppress the demand for national self-determination. It was the solidarity movement and the support it received from a handful of governments, such as those of Portugal and Ireland, which ultimately made it impossible for Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and the Australian premier John Howard to go along with Jakarta's scheme. Pilger thus made a real contribution through his journalism to the Timorese freedom struggle when the world's most powerful states were ranged against it.

There can sometimes be a tendency for people to look back at the 1990s as if it were a shortlived golden age before the 9/11 attacks, the never-ending war on terror, and the renewal of great-power conflict between Washington and Moscow. But the case of East Timor reminds us of what supposedly progressive politicians like Clinton and Blair chose to do when they possessed seemingly unlimited freedom to act on the world stage. The decisions they made during the period that was supposed to inaugurate the 'end of history' made a huge contribution to the ugliness and brutality of today's geopolitical landscape.

The mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza today is another object lesson in the reality that lurks beneath the rhetoric of Western politicians. Across the whole period since the 1960s, few individuals did more than John Pilger to bring home that reality to a mass audience, and the impact of his reporting will be felt for many years to come. ◆

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