

The Road to Environmental Justice starts in Copenhagen By Gerry Barr

As the United Nations climate change summit opened on Monday, thousands of negotiators, journalists and activists have converged upon Copenhagen Denmark for the climax of two years of negotiations. Reaching an ambitious, just and binding post-2012 agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will be one of the great tests of our generation. What must governments deliver in Copenhagen?

There are two fundamental issues up for negotiation in Copenhagen, the scale of emission reductions and the provision of financing to help poorer countries adapt to unavoidable impacts of climate change and reduce their own emissions. The first has clearly been at the forefront of the news and with good reason. It is imperative that Canada and other wealthy countries adopt ambitious targets to ensure global emissions are at least 25% below the 1990 level by 2020.

Missing from the analysis is the other lynchpin issue: that financial support for developing countries, both in the short term (now to 2012) and in the longer term (post-2012), is key to progress on a binding agreement to address climate change. Even less apparent is the kind of action needed in other key policy areas such as trade and finance, which are integrally linked to whether the planet will transition to greener economies or not.

Canada is among the top 10 polluters in the world and emits about three times more global warming pollution per person than China and more than 14 times more per person than India. It is our pollution that is destroying the lives and livelihoods of the world's most vulnerable people. The countries least responsible for climate change are those who are suffering most from its adverse impacts.

Humanitarian organizations predict increasing intensity and frequency of climate-related natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and cyclones. Massive displacement, disease, and lost livelihoods will further burden already limited state capacity. In conflict-affected fragile states, the impacts of climate change will contribute to social tensions and heighten conflicts, eroding the resilience of marginalized communities.

For all these reasons Canada must work to mitigate climate change, and help developing countries in their efforts to avoid a similarly damaging carbon-intensive model of industrialization. We need to commit resources and technology to support this transition. Canada must also generously fund adaptation and disaster risk reduction – efforts to assist the poorest to reduce their vulnerability to climate hazards. The World Bank estimates US \$61 billion a year (between 2010 to 2050) for adaptation financing. Canada's share of the global total would be about 3 to 4% or US \$2.2 billion a year. And polls show that three quarters of Canadians want action.

This is not about charity. It's about justice.

At the centre of the climate crisis are violations of human rights on a massive scale, from the right to food and water, to employment, education, political participation, and freedom from living in fear and violence.

The outcome of the negotiations must set the standards for taking action in defense of the human rights of those most affected by climate change: Indigenous peoples, peasant communities, political and economically marginalized groups, and women. These actors are not just helpless victims of the climate; they are powerful agents of change, whose sustainable practices should be seen as offering the real solutions to climate change. Their voices tell us that environmental justice is also an agenda beyond Copenhagen.

The world's trade and investment regime must be reoriented away from facilitating energy-intensive industrial sectors, fossil fuels, and intensive large-scale agriculture towards sustainable production and alternative energies. Canada can help at the World Trade Organization by pressing for trade measures that support small-scale farmers and their sustainable practices. Canada should also support Southern demands to relax intellectual property rights to ensure access to appropriate climate-friendly technologies that can support their development.

Canada must live up to its historic responsibilities, put environmental justice at the core of the debate and reform the policies governing our climate system and global economy. It's time to stop exploiting the livelihoods and lives of the world's most marginalized people and start putting their rights at the heart of the debate, starting at the UN climate summit in Copenhagen.

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