

False Solutions to the Climate Crisis

Climate change is real and it is happening now! The first people to suffer its consequences are vulnerable communities in the Global North (developed countries) and the Global South (developing countries). Even though 192 countries, under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), have affirmed the reality of climate change and promised action to reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere, the fact is that very little is being done.



There are false solutions to the climate crisis that are gaining widespread consideration and approval from the Global North. These false solutions do not challenge “business as usual”: the presumption and promotion of the false notion that endless economic growth based on unsustainable consumption levels is possible on a finite planet. They do not account for the devastating costs to human and planetary health. They draw attention away from the possibility of creating a different economic system that is premised on sustainability, and they attempt to override the democratic principles of consultation and local autonomy, especially in the case of the rights of indigenous peoples.

Mega Projects that are False solutions

Nuclear energy is not a carbon-free energy source when you consider the whole lifespan of the project from mining to construction to waste disposal. It is also extremely expensive, requiring high government subsidies that should be going to renewable energy, conservation and energy efficiency projects that can be implemented in a much shorter timeframe. Why would we make such a huge investment for a temporary solution? Conventional uranium reserves are running out, so we will increasingly need to look towards harder-to-reach resources. Nuclear energy produces waste that leaves a toxic legacy – it is a burden for long-term management that we are imposing on future generations. The danger of nuclear accidents will continue to be a source of concern for future generations.

Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) is an unproven technology. To date there are no large-scale coal-fired power plants using the technology to either capture or store carbon. According to a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study, the first commercial CCS plant won't be operating until 2030 at the earliest. There are also concerns about potential groundwater contamination and questions of how effective it can be in reducing GHGs. CCS will do little to reduce emissions in the tar sands. CCS amounts to an expensive distraction (the 2009 federal budget alone saw \$400 million allocated to it and Alberta has committed \$2 billion to advancing CCS) from more meaningful actions addressing the climate crisis. Even worse, emphasizing the proposed “potential” of CCS masks the immediate impacts of ongoing expansion of the destructive fossil fuel based energy production the climate crisis demands we transition away from.

Geo-engineering refers to large-scale human attempts to intentionally adjust major planetary systems including our air, land and water to counteract climate change. It favours the interests of Big Business and includes projects such as pumping large amounts of sulphate into the stratosphere to block sunlight and ocean fertilization to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Geo-engineering is risky and unproven. The ecological and health consequences of tampering with Earth's basic resources could be catastrophic. There has been no democratic debate about geo-engineering either nationally or globally even though the effects will be widespread, even global in nature. It is very expensive and will likely require high government subsidies. Geo-engineering assumes that humans have both the right and the wisdom to tinker irreversibly with Earth's basic processes. Chernobyl, Exxon Valdez, the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, and climate change itself are examples that this assumption is, in fact, dangerous.

Carbon trading is a system meant to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. The idea is that governments put overall limits or “caps” on permissible emissions. Companies that emit less than their cap can then sell emission credits to other companies in a market where the price for each ton of carbon dioxide is set by supply and demand.

In the case of the European experience, the only benefits from carbon trading were to speculators and big emitters who accumulated great wealth without any substantial decrease in carbon emissions. The American Power Act, proposed legislation that was before the U.S. Senate, is no more promising. The cap is far below what science says is needed and there are numerous loopholes, including the inclusion of over 2 billion tons of offsets.* In addition, ineffective trading regulations raise serious warning signs that the carbon market will be the next “bubble” to burst. As raised by Friends of the Earth, U.S., given the potentially huge size of the carbon trading market and the increasing complexity of carbon derivatives, the risk of a “subprime carbon contagion” (where climate assets fail to deliver) is a real possibility, particularly if the current credit crisis fails to spur fundamental regulation of the financial market. Canada needs to take heed because all indications are that the Canadian government will follow the lead of the U.S.

More importantly, making a commodity out of a waste product that ought not to be there in the first place seems absurd and should flag a deeper warning about the state of Euro-Western economic thought.

More free trade? Another false solution!

The World Trade Organization (WTO) and free trade agreements have been important mechanisms promoting a global economic governance model (sometimes referred to as corporate-led, economic globalization) focused on economic growth through increased global trade. There is no doubt of the causal role that increased global trade has had on increased GHGs.

In the face of the climate crisis, even more trade deals are being pursued on a multitude of levels including inter-provincial agreements, the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement and the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).

While some may suggest there is a link between liberalization and climate protection, arguing that as countries develop through increased trade their environmental standards go up, the reality is quite different. For the most part, liberalization has increased inequality and precarious living in the Global South and potential gains through better technologies are offset by increased production and exports.

Typically, commitments to sustainable development under trade agreements are weak and do very little to ensure the highest protection of our air, earth and water from corporate activity. Meanwhile these agreements go out of their way to protect investors from burdensome regulations and to lock-in unsustainable trading patterns. Significant investor rights under WTO and trade agreement rules such as NAFTA’s Chapter 11, have both a chill effect on pursuing policies that may be considered unfair trade barriers, and also provide an avenue for corporations to challenge government policy.

* *Offsets* are a second type of carbon trading (in addition to emission trading) where, instead of reducing emissions at source, industries, and in certain cases international financial institutions and governments, can buy credits generated by projects that are outside of the capped area.

Offsets provide a method for polluters to continue polluting. Typically this would involve Northern companies purchasing offsets generated in the Global South. There are serious problems in ensuring that offset credits actually equate to carbon cuts. Despite additionality rules meant to ensure that the project would not have happened without the funds attained from offsets (making these projects additional to other emission reducing actions) there is substantial evidence that these rules are not effective. Significantly, there is also evidence that certain offset projects are causing serious social and environmental harm as well as human rights violations in the Global South. Many in the Global South warn that this is just another way that the North will be allowed to exploit the cultures, lands and peoples in the South.