Where the Cancún Climate Conference Leaves Us

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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This commentary contains a recap of the new Agreements as well as these sections:

• Do your neighbors care?

• Witnesses, keep it real

• Oil reality

• Factor: indigenous people (includes Bolivia's dissent)

There is no reliable scientific assessment on just where we are vis-à-vis global climate destabilization. We can do better by acting on clear trends and options.
Climate computer models have been too conservative, as changes have shocked with their premature arrival.
Governments and corporations continue to put humanity and all life at risk.

People need to step back for some perspective and face simple, powerful truths: Get off oil and other fossil fuels now, not when the renewable energy technofix is supposed to come to the rescue and solve everything.

Cease deforestation and accelerate reforestation. Take matters into our own hands locally instead of holding our breath for policy reforms in the corrupt halls of power.

There are three views since the Cancún U.N. Climate Change Conference, COP 16, ended this Saturday:

• One, that it was a tremendous gift or blessing that the meeting was salvaged with better-than-hoped-for stated intentions for future action. A climate climax: cheers at the official and unofficial meetings toward the end of the apparent consensus-process reflected attendees' emotional hope, relief and surprise that the U.S. and other bad actors seem to be capable of rational change.

• Two, as expressed by the New York Times' report, no great achievement materialized. Their headline says it all: "Climate Talks End With Modest Deal on Emissions," adding that "Envoys from more than 190 nations in Cancún were given a year to decide whether to extend the frayed Kyoto Protocol... The [Cancún] agreement is not a legally binding treaty, but the success of these talks allows the process to seek a more robust accord at next year's climate conference in Durban, South Africa."

• Three, this was "Copenhagen II" - a colossal failure. Bolivia and other indigenous-heavy nations and organizations slammed the Cancún Agreements. From their standpoint, they needed the world's power elite to turn their back on fossil fuels, mega-profits, and domination of the planet -- now. Fat chance.

Albert Bates, climate change author well known to readers of Culture Change and Energy Bulletin, is of the first group. An astute observer and early analyst of the role of technology in an overpopulated world, he went to Cancún without much hope, after witnessing the Copenhagen debacle. If he's happy now, and he is, I should be too.

In his Great Change blog, Albert gave a Twitter by Twitter rundown of the climax of the meeting. His blog also provided a recap of the main points of the Agreement:

•All countries to cut emissions

•Payments for countries who avoid deforestation and conserve nature

•Finance deal to provide $30bn for developing countries to adapt to climate change now, and potentially up to $100bn later.

•A new UN climate fund to be run mostly by developing countries

•Easier transfer of low carbon technology and expertise to poor countries

•China, the US and other major emitters to have their economies inspected

•Scientific review of progress after five years

It sounds good enough, but is it good enough? It seems to me, far from Cancún, after looking at various reports on the conference (some links are below), that the U.N. process was being cheered more than actual climate protection progress. I do not have much faith in agreements or intentions when corporatism and consumerism still rule. It is when petroleum runs out (or, more likely, hits fatal supply bottlenecks) that we'll see true change (not all good or all bad).

Do your neighbors care?

A test of human concern over the climate crisis is the attitude of one's neighbors, even in the U.S. where a twentieth of the world's population consumes a quarter of the world's polluting energy. After all, they know weather is right outside their homes and cars, and only a small minority has no real concern over the climate. This is not the same as denial; many people are subject to fear and tempting propaganda of easy answers in a complex, threatening world. I even know my neighbors -- for this I am unusual in urban and suburban USA -- and they know I follow climate and energy. They never bring up these subjects, even though talking about the weather always seems to have climate change lurking unsaid. When they come to me someday and want to discuss what's going on, it may be during panic and great fear. In my particular community, we will help each other out, although our level of preparation and pre-collapse organizing are seriously lacking.

The significance of the attitudes of one's neighbors, bar mates' or fellow bus riders' on climate destabilization and the meaning of Cancún is this: The failure of the just-concluded meeting is its inability to engage the average person. Anyone following Cancún or the United Nations climate efforts can honestly feel that he or she is unaffected. Those affected seem to be limited to the elite in professional and investment spheres.

When one's family, friends and acquaintances want to talk about the climate in a serious way, and want to know about Cancún and Durban, that signifies hopeful change. But we are still not at that point. Bring up Cancún or Durban to the average person and you may get a polite reaction, but in future you will be avoided -- until they see their little world getting a violent shock and wake-up call.

Witnesses, keep it real

Grassroots-activist witnesses to the Cancún and Durban meetings have their role, for the decision makers and

delegates know that the witnesses, and people back home they talk to, are watching. The nations' delegates and their superiors have not so far had to worry much about the witnesses and activists back home mushrooming in number to coalesce and build their movement into something that has to be reckoned with. Indeed, most non-delegates such as corporate news-media and many nonprofit NGOs go about their work as if the grassroots climate protection movement is a side-show. Even though almost all the witnesses in Cancún are always busy trying to grow their movement, the most they can take home is that they made more friends to commiserate with -- until now. We shall see if there is momentum for the movement, or if the happy feeling many got from Cancún will produce fog and indecision.

They must never forget that Obama and the U.S. representative at Cancún, Todd Stern, are first and foremost for economic growth. The economy comes first with those holding the cards and calling the shots. So when they address climate issues they are talking out of both sides of their mouths. They want more fossil fuel production and consumption in the short term, although short term lasts forever in terms of climate impact. They may wish that the whole economy could somehow run on "clean" renewable energy sooner rather than later. It cannot, if it would resemble the present one. Even if it could, fossil fuels are here, and climate tipping points say fossil fuels should have been shut down globally years ago -- if that "problem" out there called the environment is considered with the respect it demands.

Oil reality

As an independent oil industry analyst who looks at the larger ecological and societal picture, I have to repeat the petrocollapse supremacy: Climate change forecasts cannot count on economic growth when the cheap abundant oil has past its high tide mark for humanity. Collapse is ahead, cheering some who see it as the only hope for dismantling the global warming machinery and global warming culture. To cope proactively with petrocollapse is to emancipate oneself from petroleum dependence prior to collapse. A lifestyle consistent with this is the ultimate climate protection, along with not breeding more consumers beyond one or two children per family.

Oil reality is hitting, but with a slow-motion effect of several months' little perceived change. Over several years we can see the effect of oil's effects on society. When oil was cheap and abundant, U.S. prosperity was at its height. Now were are in the Great Recession, called by some the first peak oil recession. Some believe it is part of the downslope or crash after Hubbert's Peak. What we have yet to see is a massive geopolitically caused supply shortage in our post-peak present. The present has arrived:

"If the global average decline rate of current oil production is only 5% per annum, we would need approximately 20 million barrels per day of new supply in just five years. Assuming Ghawar’s production is still 5 million barrels per day, this equates to 4 Ghawars! 5% is also probably far lower than the real number." - the late Matthew Simmons, November 2009

Peak oil has hit, according to Simmons as well as the International Energy Agency (links to both are below). Mexico is feeling it with the quick depletion of its vaunted Cantarell field.

When the one looks toward next year’s climate conference in Durban, South Africa, this raises a question: Just how sincere will delegates going to Durban be when they either fly with dirty jet fuel or ride on clean, free wind-power on sailboats? There is train service almost throughout Africa, so that mode can accommodate those vulnerable to sea sickness. Aside from the "practical" objections to green travel that busy jetsetters will always have, powerful interests would frown on their national delegates' not using petroleum and the transport of corporate businesses.

Factor: the indigenous people

Sarah James reflected the feelings of indigenous peoples attending Cancun, in a statement broadcast from Cancún as

the UN Climate Change Conference just concluded. Sarah James attended for the protection of the Gwich'in people and their caribou-rich homelands.

"We are the Ones Who Have Everything to Lose"

Maybe there are too few of us to matter. Maybe people think Indians are not important enough to consider in making their energy decisions. But it's my people who are threatened by this development. We are the ones who have everything to lose.

The oil companies keep saying that all their roads and pipelines aren't going to bother the caribou. But we know the caribou. We know they don't like all that stuff, especially when they are having their calves. We are concerned about all the salt and chemicals they put on their roads. It can drain onto the tundra, get into the water, and be unhealthy for the young caribou. A report from the Canadian government tells us that the caribou have already been disturbed around the oil fields. If we lose the caribou there will be no more forever."
--Sarah James, Gwich'in Steering Committee

Statement by the Indigenous Environmental Network

Cancun Betrayal: UNFCCC Unmasked as WTO of the Sky

Real Solutions to the Climate Crisis Will Come From Grassroots Movements

Cancún, Mexico -- As representatives of Indigenous peoples and communities already suffering the immediate impacts of climate change, we express our outrage and disgust at the agreements that have emerged from the COP16 talks. As was exposed in the Wikileaks climate scandal, the Cancún Agreements are not the result of an informed and open consensus process, but the consequence of an ongoing US diplomatic offensive of backroom deals, arm-twisting and bribery that targeted nations in opposition to the Copenhagen Accord during the months leading up to the COP-16 talks.

We are not fooled by this diplomatic shell game. The Cancun Agreements have no substance.

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References and further reading:

Albert Bates'
The Great Change blog:
"The Cancún Miracle." Saturday, December 11, 2010

"Climate Talks End With Modest Deal on Emissions" by John M. Broder, December 11, 2010:
nytimes.com

IEA acknowledges peak oil:
EnergyBulletin.net

Matthew Simmons: “Global crude oil peaked in 2005” (interview), at
EnergyBulletin.net, by Lars Schall (the original in German is at this writing a bad link; Komponente nicht gefunden!)

The Indigenous Environmental Network

Sail Transport Network

Pledge for Climate Protection - deals with petrcollapse simultaneously.

Bolivia's Press Release condemning Cancún agreement

Plurinational State of Bolivia

Bolivia Decries Adoption of Copenhagen Accord II Without Consensus

December 11, 2010 (Cancún, Mexico) - The Plurinational State of Bolivia believes that the Cancun text is a hollow and false victory that was imposed without consensus, and its cost will be measured in human lives. History will judge harshly.

There is only one way to measure the success of a climate agreement, and that is based on whether or not it will effectively reduce emissions to prevent runaway climate change. This text clearly fails, as it could allow global temperatures to increase by more than 4 degrees, a level disastrous for humanity. Recent scientific reports show that 300,000 people already die each year from climate change-related disasters. This text threatens to increase the number of deaths annually to one million. This is something we can never accept.

Last year, everyone recognized that Copenhagen was a failure both in process and substance. Yet this year, a deliberate campaign to lower expectations and desperation for any agreement has led to one that in substance is little more than Copenhagen II.

A so-called victory for multilateralism is really a victory for the rich nations who bullied and cajoled other nations into accepting a deal on their terms. The richest nations offered us nothing new in terms of emission reductions or financing, and instead sought at every stage to backtrack on existing commitments, and include every loophole possible to reduce their obligation to act.

While developing nations -- those that face the worst consequences of climate change -- pleaded for ambition, we were instead offered the "realism" of empty gestures. Proposals by powerful countries like the US were sacrosanct, while ours were disposable. Compromise was always at the expense of the victims, rather than the culprits of climate change. When Bolivia said we did not agree with the text in the final hours of talks, we were overruled. An accord where only the powerful win is not a negotiation, it is an imposition.

Bolivia came to Cancun with concrete proposals that we believed would bring hope for the future. These proposals were agreed by 35,000 people in an historic World People's Conference Cochabamba in April 2010. They seek just solutions to the climate crisis and address its root causes. In the year since Copenhagen, they were integrated into the negotiating text of the parties, and yet the Cancun text systematically excludes these voices. Bolivia cannot be convinced to abandon its principles or those of the peoples we represent. We will continue to struggle alongside affected communities worldwide until climate justice is achieved.

Bolivia has participated in these negotiations in good faith and the hope that we could achieve an effective climate deal. We were prepared to compromise on many things, except the lives of our people. Sadly, that is what the world's richest nations expect us to do. Countries may try to isolate us for our position, but we come here in representation of the peoples and social movements who want real and effective action to protect the future of humanity and Mother Earth. We feel their support as our guide. History will be the judge of what has happened in Cancun.