

The Challenges Facing COP 20

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At 10 o'clock on December 1st 2014, Manuel Pulgar-Vidal, the Peruvian Minister of State for the Environment and President of COP 20 – the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) - opened COP20.. The Minister is a lawyer with 27 years experience working in the field of environmental law and policy, so he knows the reality of climate change and consequence of not taking it seriously.

In his opening speech, he challenged the participants to make ambitious pledges to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. He also challenged rich countries to make more money available to assist poor nations which will be adversely affected by the consequence of climate change. New non-fossil fuel technologies are also essential so that the poor can improved their standard of living without opting for a fossil fuel avenue in their quest for development. He said that he would do everything in his power as the President of COP 20 to facilitate agreement among the parties. He highlighted how climate change affects young people, women and indigenous people. Therefore he hoped that the dialogue and compromises which will be trashed out here in Lima will lead to concrete action to address climate change.

Manuel Pulgar-Vidal spoke well about the need human beings to change from a business-as-usual approach to the way we use fossil fuel and the imperative to moving rapidly to using clean energy. Unfortunately, my Columban colleagues here in Peru point out that his fine words on the environment are not always reflected in environmental policy in Peru. This perception is shared by others. In a second editorial in the *International New York Times*, (29-30, November, page 10) the author point out that “ in September (2014) four indigenous activists who stood up to unscrupulous loggers in a remote region of Peru’s

rainforest were slain.” The editorial went on to state that while Peru has “made commendable pledges to reduce deforestation...it must do more to protect some of its most vulnerable citizens by helping them to acquire land titles and regulating the logging industry more tightly.”

On December 4th 2014, ECO the publication of Climate Action Network (CAN) published an article stating that “Peruvian civil society organisations and grassroots movements are seizing the hosting of COP20 by Peru to join efforts in elevating environmental issues on the government’s agenda, particularly as part of the country’s development policies.”

While the Presidency of the COP20 should have been an opportunity for the Peruvian government to show leadership in environmental issues, its recent national policies show that the environment has become less and less of a priority. For example, in July this year the government approved the so-called Ley 30230 (also known as ‘Ley Paquetazo’), which reduces the importance of environmental standards with the aim to attract investment in the extractive industries.

The promotion of extractive industries has already led to cases such as that of Maxima Chaupe, a female farmer. She was sued by Yanacocha – one of the biggest gold mining companies – for living on the land where Yanacocha was planning its Conga extraction project. Maxima and her family were not only ordered to leave the land, they were also asked to pay Yanacocha a compensation fine of about US\$2,000.

Minister Pulgar-Vidal was followed by Christiana Figueres, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. She said that in addressing climate change in an effective way, the international community would need to demonstrate the insights and tenacity of the people

who drew the Nazca lines in the Nazca Desert in southern Peru. She reminded the participants that 2014 is on track to be the hottest year in recent history. This fact alone calls for faster action and more ambitious goals. She urged those present to make history in Lima by seeking to build bridges among the participating countries which will lead to concrete commitments and actions.

The final speaker was Rajendra K. Pachauri who has served as the chairperson of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) since 2002. He referred to the findings of the Synthesis Report of the 3 Working Groups on the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC which was published in September 2014.

This is the work of 803 scientists. Their findings are very challenging. The document confirms that human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems. The warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, and sea level has risen. Rajendra Pachauri stressed that remaining below the 2 degree Celsius target will require that greenhouse gas emissions decline by 40 to 70% by 2050, relative to 2010 levels, and drop to zero or negative by the end of the century.

Each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth's surface than any preceding decade since 1850. The period from 1983 to 2012 was likely the warmest 30-year period of the last 1400 years in the northern hemisphere where such assessment is possible. This document calls for massive concerted global action if we are to avoid the worst excesses of climate change.