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Views from civil society on geoengineering research and governance

C2G2 Webinar on Geoengineering and Biological Diversity, November 2, 2017

Good evening, everyone, from my part of the world in southern Philippines, and thank you to C2G2 for inviting me to give this presentation on views from civil society on geoengineering research and governance.

[Slide] As far as civil society that has been engaging on geoengineering are concerned, for us CBD decisions should be a starting point for geoengineering research and governance.

Those of us who have been engaging in the CBD since 2007-2008 on this issue are fully aware that the CBD decisions are the only existing UN decisions that directly address concerns in geoengineering, as already presented by Phil earlier, the 2008 moratorium on ocean fertilization and then the larger decision on geoengineering in 2010.

Of course, a lot of proponents argue that these are soft laws, these are not moratoriums, these have no legal weight. But we cannot deny that these decisions reflect the consensus views of CBD member states.

I do not think it is going to give us any progress in this discussion if we continue to undermine the weight that the CBD brings into this discussion on geoengineering governance and research.

Also, we have to bear in mind that CBD decisions, soft law or not, were able to stop geoengineering experiments, real experiments, outdoor experiments, which only points to the importance given by governance to these decisions that reflect the consensus views of UN member states.

In 2009, the LOHAFEX experiment, the German-Indian experiment, was actually stopped in view of the provisions in the 2008 decision on ocean fertilization. It violated that so it was actually stopped.

In 2012, there was an experiment off Vancouver Island that happened actually, coincidentally, at the end of the Conference of the Parties in Hyderabad. This was also raised in the plenary. The experiment went on. The Canadian government did not even know about it, but the Canadian government acted post facto, also citing the decisions that came out from the CBD.

[Slide] We also believe that the precautionary principle should be a cornerstone in the whole discussion of geoengineering governance and research. It should not be a risk/risk assessment that weighs unknown planet impacts against potential promises of geoengineering. To us the cautionary principle is a basis for environmental decision-making. The key components should always be observed, namely:

- Taking preventive action in the face of concerns. There is also, of course, some perversion and misuse of that by some proponents of geoengineering.
- Also, we have to emphasize that shifting the burden of proof to the proponents of an activity is important.

- Also, the importance of exploring a wide range of alternatives to possibly harmful actions.
- Lastly but equally important, which was actually emphasized by the presentation of Yolanda, is the importance of increasing public participation in decision-making on governance and research of geoengineering in line with the precautionary principle.

[Slide] We oppose the outdoor experiments, believing that these could lead to slippery slopes. Outdoor experiments in geoengineering technologies will have consequent effects on the environment, no matter how local, no matter how small scale, the proponents argue they are.

Also, it is notable that in many of these experiments there is a notable absence of comprehensive environmental impact assessment (EIA), specifically impacts on biodiversity that are notably absent in the geoengineering proposals for outdoor experiments.

To us, allowing outdoor experiments, apart from going into the slippery slope, leads to public conditioning that it is safe, thus justifying the bigger ones.

There is also a very important consideration about the moral implications. In particular, for example, the United States in the case of SCoPEX planning or allowing outdoor experiments to provide proof of principle, on two grounds: that it takes advantage of the loophole that the United States is a nonparty to the CBD, therefore outside of the application or scope of whatever decision was adopted by member states in that platform; also, we should take into account that in this whole debate we cannot just ignore the fact that the United States, for example, has distanced itself and threatened even withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, while at the same time supporting this outdoor experiment that would allow a cop-out on global warming.

Those moral implications and ethical debates are important in these discussions as well.

[Slide] NGOs are also raising concerns about the distraction and diversion presented by geoengineering experiments. The promises of quick fixes of global warming actually distract us from other solutions involving paradigm shifts, structural transformation, and lifestyle changes.

They may say that these are just supplemental to deep cuts, to real cuts and generally mitigation, but we are talking here of a context where there are sparse resources that could be diverted from much more important, proven, and readily deployable alternatives to such large-scale, high-tech technologies, such as geoengineering, particularly solar radiation management. So instead of using those resources to deploy and promote proven and readily deployable alternatives, those resources get actually diverted.

Instead, we should really focus on the need to consider transformative emission reduction options based on existing technologies and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and planetary boundaries.

[Slide] We also have to take into account that while we are discussing this issue in the context of the CBD, the realm of geoengineering issues actually transcends planetary change, or even biodiversity. These are way beyond the realm of the CBD and the UNFCCC, and even way beyond the mandate of individual UN agencies. So, in many ways we are talking here of planetary survival, which is not just about biodiversity or climate change.

If you zoom into the CBD and put the whole discussion of geoengineering in that context, there are far more important issues than geoengineering that the CBD should pay attention to, many outstanding matters on biodiversity and climate change, particularly those that are relevant to indigenous peoples and local communities that need urgent attention and more resources.

[Slide] Among the biggest questions that civil society always raise on the issue of geoengineering, in particular on solar radiation management, is the question of who will make decisions and how these decisions are going to be made.

In reality, while we have CBD as the only body in the UN platform that has discussed and tackled geoengineering head-on since a few years back, the United Nations has no experience or a mechanism to allow countries to decide on the basis of winners or losers that will result from technological interventions, such as SRM.

Phil and Dr. MacMartin already mentioned the unequal impacts, the varying regional consequences of SRM. So there will be ultimately winners or losers. I think that it is really clear when we talk of governance that the bottom line of the decision-making here will be who will be the winners and the losers.

[Slide] So key, as was emphasized by Yolanda, is the issue of participation and transparency. That is nonnegotiable. Participation here is at different levels, at the local, national, and regional levels, and will involve societal participation in deliberations and decision-making.

[Slide] Many of us in civil society who have been engaging in this process are actually calling for a ban on geoengineering. But when we talk of governance of geoengineering, it is not just about how to facilitate or promote research or deployment; governance is also about how to enforce a decision to ban geoengineering. That would require some governance at the highest levels with the broadest participation of society, especially those who will most likely be impacted.

Thank you.