

## Combating the climate crisis, US-style

In the run-up to the vote on climate-change legislation in the US House of Representatives in June, no fewer than 1,150 different organisations and companies were in Washington, promoting their vision of how the nation should tackle climate change.<sup>1</sup> This means well over two lobbyists per representative. The huge increase in the number of lobbyists – there were only about 155 in 2003 – reflects the widespread recognition that Barack Obama means business. “With George Bush sitting in the White House, nobody thought there was going to be a bill passed”, said Deborah Sliz, from the lobbying firm Morgan Meguire.

Most of the lobbyists represent special corporate interests so, not surprisingly, the original 648-page draft has already ballooned into a 1,428-page monster, with many amendments. It is difficult to judge whether the main goal – to reduce the nation’s greenhouse gas emissions by 17 per cent by 2020 – has remained intact after such a hammering. And more changes are expected before December, as the bill makes its way through the Senate.

Industrialists, power companies and the oil and gas industry still dominate the lobby, but the farm sector has been increasingly flexing its muscles. A group of agriculture giants, including Cargill, Tyson Foods and General Mills, has formed a coalition and are working closely together. Even though they won important concessions in the negotiations prior to the vote in the House, including an exemption from having to cap most greenhouse gas emissions from farms (see page 20), they are pressing for further changes. Showing a hitherto unsuspected concern for the poor, they claim that in its present form the bill will

have “adverse impacts on food security” and will harm “low-income households struggling with rising food prices”.

Although their interests often coincide, there is some tension between the farm giants and the biofuels lobby, which is anxious to maintain maize subsidies. In 2007 POET Biorefining from South Dakota overtook agricultural giant Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) as the country’s leading producer of ethanol from maize. POET only recently joined the lobbyists and has been mainly active through a new interest group, Growth Energy, which it created with other ethanol manufacturers. Reflecting the close corporate-military nexus, retired four-star general and former NATO commander Wesley Clark is the group’s public face.

1 Marianne Lavelle, “Tally of interests on climate bill tops a thousand”, Center for Public Integrity, 10 August 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/krb8tu>

### Biopiracy of climate-resistant crops

Some readers, particularly in the USA and Europe, will have seen the advert. A sophisticated picture in pink, orange, black and white of blurred people on the move, and above in large letters: “9 billion people to feed. A changing climate. NOW WHAT?” Below, more text: “Experts say we’ll need to double agricultural output by 2050 to feed a growing world. That’s challenge enough. But with a changing climate, the challenge becomes even greater.” The solution? “Providing abundant and accessible food means putting the latest science-based tools in farmers’ hands, including advanced hybrid and biotech seeds.... That’s a win-win for people and the earth itself.”

In recent months, biotech companies (in this case, it’s Monsanto) have been carrying out a big publicity drive to present themselves as benevolent, environmentally aware suppliers of the only technology that can feed the world as the climate crisis escalates. But behind this façade is another, harsher reality: a race to patent the crops that are resistant to extremes of weather. Earlier this year Navdanya, a non-governmental organisation founded by the Indian



*Dr Vandana Shiva*

scientist and environmental activist, Vandana Shiva, published a report entitled “Biopiracy of climate-resistant crops: gene giants steal farmers’ innovation of drought resistant, flood resistant and salt resistant varieties”. The report said that four companies – BASF Bayer of Germany, Syngenta of Switzerland and the US-based Monsanto and Du Pont – had taken out hundreds of patents on climate-resistant crops developed and saved by Indian communities.

Vandana Shiva told IPS that the biotech companies were piling “one disaster upon another” by looking at the climate crisis as a business opportunity. “On the basis of this new form of biopiracy, the biotech industry is positioning itself as the climate saviour and making governments and the public believe that, but for them, there will be no climate-resistant seeds”, she said. “By making broad claims on all crops and all traits, the industry is closing future options for adaptation to climate change.” In the report, Navdanya said that the response to the climate crisis lay not in patented seeds but “in the hands of millions of farmers conserving, improving and breeding hundreds of thousands of varieties of climate-resilient crops that are specifically adapted to local conditions and a changing environment”.

### Leaving the land in Syria

In 2007 and 2008 some 160 villages in northern Syria were abandoned by their inhabitants because of a serious drought, which climatologists believe could recur with increasing frequency. According to a report published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), “climate change



*United States Capitol, Washington DC*



The River Euphrates, from its source in the mountains of Turkey, runs through Syria and Iraq to the Persian Gulf

[in Jordan, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories] threatens to reduce the availability of scarce water resources, increase food insecurity, hinder economic growth and lead to large-scale population movements". The IISD predicts that even modest global warming would lead to a 30 per cent drop in water in the Euphrates, which runs through Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

Oli Brown, who wrote the report with Alec Crawford, said: "Climate change itself poses real security concerns to the region. It could lead to increased militarisation of strategic natural resources, complicating peace agreements. Israel is already using climate change as an excuse to increase their control over the water resources in the region."

### Agro-ecological farmers weather the storm

As in many other parts of Brazil, farmers in the Planalto Norte region in the state of Santa Catarina faced difficult weather

conditions in the 2008-9 farming year. First, at the beginning of planting season in October, it rained very heavily, causing flash flooding. Then, after many of the farmers had been forced to replant, there was an extended period of drought until the end of December. According to a field study carried out by AS-PTA, an organisation of small-scale, agro-ecological farmers, conventional farmers lost R\$762 (about US\$416) per hectare. In contrast, farmers in the region who were in the process of converting to agro-ecological farming, had a profit of R\$980 (US\$534) per hectare, largely because their costs were only one-tenth of those incurred by conventional farmers. The study shows that even in the short term, when farmers are still learning how to farm without chemical inputs, they are often in a much better position than other farmers to deal with the unpredictable weather stemming from climate change.

### Gone but not forgotten

In the last issue of *Seedling*, we reported that the authorities in Egypt had taken advantage of the swine flu epidemic to order the wholesale slaughter of the 300,000 or so pigs reared by small producers. They had taken this drastic measure even though swine flu is widely known to be transmitted by humans, not pigs, and no case of the disease had been reported in the country. The government said that it was a hygiene measure to rid the country of "unsanitary pig farming conditions" and to make way for "cleaner" European-style factory farms.

The measure, however, has had a side-effect that is far from hygienic: the proliferation of rubbish in the streets. Ramadan Hediya, 35, who makes deliveries for a supermarket, lives in Madinat el Salam, a low-income community on the outskirts of Cairo. She told the *New York Times*: "All the pathways are full of rubbish. When you open your window to breathe, you find heaps of rubbish on the ground." The problem should not have come as a surprise. Indeed, public health experts criticised the pig massacre at the time as "misguided", and warned the authorities that the city would be overwhelmed with rubbish.

What the measure did, in fact, was completely disrupt Cairo's rubbish collection system, without providing a proper replacement. For more than half a century, people from the *zabaleen* community of Coptic Christians who live on the cliffs on the eastern edge of the city, collected the rubbish, sold the recyclables and fed the organic waste to their pigs – which provided their community with pork. "They killed the pigs, so let them clean the city," said Moussa Rateb, a former rubbish collector and pig owner.

According to some social commentators, the crisis has exposed the failings of a government where power is concentrated at the top, where decisions are often carried out with little consideration for their consequences, and where follow-up is often non-existent. Killing all the pigs, all at once, "was the stupidest thing they ever did," said Laila Iskandar Kamel, chairwoman of a community development organisation in Cairo.



Pigs in the back yard of a house in a zabaleen community, Cairo, before the cull



Photo: Dan Baron-Cohen

Tending crops on an agro-ecological school farm, Santa Catarina