

CORPORATE GLOBALISATION: ENVIRONMENT=PROFIT

By Bronwyn Powell

"I think the economic logic of dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we have to face up to that." World Bank vice-president Lawrence Summers, December 1991. That quote is scary not only for what it says but for who is saying it.

While Summers is no longer the World Bank's vice-president (he went on to become Bill Clinton's treasury secretary and is now the president of Harvard University), and while today's vice-president would be nowhere near as blunt, there is no reason to believe the World Bank has changed its views.

This is an institution which has more control over the environment and development than most governments, let alone most of the world's people. The World Bank's official mission is to provide "development" loans to poor countries - but they always come with strings attached, which specify the exact form that "development" will take.

An example of what that means for the environment is happening right now in the central African nations of Chad and Cameroon. A consortium of ExxonMobil, Chevron and Petronas is building a 1100-kilometre pipeline from the oil-rich southern Doba region of Chad to Cameroon's Atlantic coast at Kribi. The project will likely produce 225,000 barrels of oil each day - and a lot of money, although predictably little of it will end up in the pockets of the people of Chad and Cameroon.

The project will be potentially devastating for fragile ecosystems along the pipeline's path. In Cameroon's Atlantic littoral forest, the pipeline crosses rivers 17 times and passes through the lands of the indigenous Baka and Bakola people, yet it has no disaster management plan. The pipeline's terminal, in Kribi, is right in front of the Lobe waterfalls, one of very few which flow directly into the

ocean.

ExxonMobil, one of the world's richest oil companies, has said that it has been the involvement of the World Bank which has made the difference between success and failure - not just because of the bank's US\$365 million in loans but because of its "leverage".

Both Chad and Cameroon are highly indebted and have little export income; they are dependent on World Bank loans and goodwill to survive. The condition for that goodwill is that both countries allow Western oil companies to devastate their natural environments.

Even scarier is the fact that Lawrence Summers is right. From his (pro-capitalist) perspective, it does make "impeccable economic sense" to dump toxic waste in countries that can't afford to stop it from happening.

For corporations like ExxonMobil, and for international institutions like the World Bank, which serve them, everything is viewed within the context of profit or loss.

Environmental considerations cost money, so they are something to avoid.

It is this profit-first, environment-last attitude that is today being "globalised" by corporations, governments, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation.

Because environmental protection is a financial obstacle - a barrier to "free" trade - transnational corporations have lobbied successfully to make it harder for governments to hold them accountable for the damage they inflict.

For example, before the last ministerial meeting in Seattle in November 1999, members of the WTO were attempting to force through an agreement, dubbed by environmentalists the "Global Free Logging Agreement", which would have restricted governments' ability to protect forests, even native forest,

national parks and wildlife reserves, from logging companies.

Those governments which tried to do so would have faced trade sanctions and financial penalties.

Likewise, the North American Free Trade Agreement between the US, Mexico and Canada allows corporations to sue governments which act against them, even on the grounds of environmental protection or public safety.

A NAFTA panel, for instance, has ruled that the Mexican government has to pay millions of dollars to a US company, Metalclad, to compensate for the closure of its toxic waste dump in San Luis Potosi. The waste dump was leaching toxins into the river system, and Mexico ordered it closed for safety reasons. Not good enough, said the NAFTA panel, that's a restriction on free enterprise.

This is what

"globalisation" is all about - making the planet just a thing to be bought and sold, a source of individual wealth. And it is this which the new movement against corporate globalisation is striving to end.

The global anti-corporate movement

When biodiversity and sustainability are counted as costs in a profit-driven world, there can be no real move toward a more sustainable world. When only a tiny elite makes decisions on production, there can be no way for humanity as a whole to choose what is or is not in its interests.

Environmentalists have been a major part of this new movement which has protested so powerfully in Seattle, in Prague, in Melbourne at S11, in Quebec City, in Gothenburg, in Genoa, and in many other cities around the globe.

The new movement's strength has come from its ability to embrace all the different movements fighting for justice - environmentalists with unionists, with grassroots movements in the Third World

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