



Let's look before we leap

Civil society calls for **Technology Assessment** as part of any Copenhagen deal



Technology transfer is one of the four key topics being discussed under negotiations on Long-Term Cooperative Actions in Copenhagen (the others are mitigation, adaptation and financing). The inter-governmental negotiating text that is under discussion contemplates various measures for accelerating the diffusion of technologies. It will most likely create an 'Action Plan' as well as a 'Technology Body' and various technical panels or innovation centres that will prove influential in the coming years in deciding which technologies get financial and political backing. We need to make sure the right technologies get the support they need and the wrong ones are discarded. That won't happen without a comprehensive social and environmental assessment process.

We, civil society groups and social movements from around the world, understand the urgent need for real and lasting solutions to climate change. We recognise the deadly consequences that we all face if these are not achieved. We must urgently strengthen our resilience to meet the climate change challenge while dramatically reducing our greenhouse gas emissions.

Some corporations, individuals and even governments are fostering panic and helplessness to push for untested and unproven technologies, as 'our only option'. However we do not wish to see a proliferation of unproven technologies without due consideration of their ecological and social consequences. Some technologies being promoted for their capacity to store carbon or to manipulate natural systems may have disastrous ecological or social consequences. Technologies that may be beneficial in certain contexts could be harmful in others.

In many cases, action to address climate change is within our reach already and does not involve complex new technologies but rather conscious decisions and public policies to reduce our ecological footprint. For example, many indigenous peoples and peasants have sound endogenous technologies that already help them cope with the impacts of climate change, and to overlook these existing practices in favour of new, proprietary technologies from elsewhere is senseless.

Technologies assessed as both environmentally and socially sound need to be exchanged. Intellectual property rules should not be allowed to stand in the way. But some technologies

that are being promoted as ‘environmentally sound’ have foreseeable and serious negative social or environmental impacts. For example:

- Nuclear power carries known environmental and health dangers, as well as a strong potential for nuclear weapons proliferation.
- Crop and tree plantations for bioenergy and biofuels can lead to large-scale displacement of farmers and indigenous peoples, and destruction of existing carbon-dense ecosystems, thus accelerating climate change.
- Agricultural practices involving genetically modified crops and trees, use of agrochemicals and synthetic fertilisers, large-scale monocultures and industrial livestock-rearing, present dangers to climate, human health and biodiversity.

Intentional, large-scale, technological interventions in the oceans, atmosphere, and land (geoengineering) could further destabilise the climate system and have devastating consequences for countries far away from those who will make the decisions.

- Ocean fertilisation could disturb the food chain and disrupt marine ecosystems.
- Injecting sulphates into the stratosphere could cause widespread drought in equatorial zones, causing crop failures and worsening hunger.
- Biochar is unproven for sequestering carbon or improving soils, yet strongly promoted by certain commercial interests.

In Copenhagen, a new international body responsible for climate-related technologies is likely to be created and new funds will be made available to it. But so far, the negotiating texts make no mention of the need for this new body to assess the socio-economic and environmental impacts of these technologies (which are frequently trans-boundary), or to consider the perspectives of populations likely to be affected, including women, indigenous peoples, peasants, fisher folk and others.

Precaution demands the careful assessment of technologies *before*, not after, governments and inter-governmental bodies start funding their development and aiding their deployment around the globe. There is already a precedent in international law: the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, ratified by 157 countries, gives effect to this principle on genetically modified organisms. National and international programs of public consultation, with the participation of the people who are directly affected, are critical. People must have the ability to decide which technologies they want, and to reject technologies that are neither environmentally sound nor socially equitable.

We therefore demand that a clear and consistent approach be followed internationally for all new technologies on climate change: States at COP 15 must ensure that strict precautionary mechanisms for technology assessment are enacted and are made legally binding, so that the risks and likely impacts, and appropriateness, of these new technologies, can be properly and democratically evaluated before they are rolled out. Any new body dealing with technology assessment and transfer must have equitable gender and regional representation, in addition to facilitating the full consultation and participation of peasants, indigenous peoples and potentially affected local communities.

**To add your organisation’s signature, send email with subject line:
Look Before You Leap to Francesca@etcgroup.org**