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Climate experts' forum: Are NGOs in danger of sabotaging the talks?

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FT Energy Source is posting a daily question for our panel of expert commentators. Below are responses from panel members Kyoto carbon markets architect Graciela Chichilnisky, Jeremy Leggett of Solarcentury, Lord Browne of the Royal Academy of Engineering and Vivienne Cox of Climate Change Capital.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) have been sounding the alarm over details of a possible agreement at Copenhagen, and attacking some of the mechanisms for tackling climate change, such as carbon trading. Are they in danger of sabotaging the talks?

Jeremy Leggett: NGOs on both sides of the fence are in danger of sabotaging the talks, and always have been through the 20 years of their history. Business NGOs include organisations who would agree wholeheartedly with Sarah Palin's call on President Barack Obama, in yesterday's Washington Post, to boycott the summit. Such organisations, often representing US coal and oil interests, have long sought to detonate mines under the fragile process of multilateral consensus building on global warming. I describe in my book 'The Carbon War' some of their tactics along the way: disinformation at best, lies at worst. I use the "L" word with due consideration. Peter Carter Ruck Associates put The Carbon War under a libel microscope before its publication.

For their part, it has to be said of some of the environment and development NGOs that they often seem more interested in the politics of protest than they do in the politics of change. There is no doubt that one potential negative endgame scenario in Copenhagen involves poor countries – egged on by some NGOs, as they would be – holding out for the theoretically perfect, making that the enemy of the realistically good. That is a route to cutting off noses to spite faces. I elaborate on the scientific underpinnings of this calculation in my second blog of the series.

Of course, it has to be admitted that it is easy for businessmen and investors like me to talk about realpolitik, and sit back hoping that targets we feel might be realistic, but know to be inadequate, prove capable of triggering faster mobilisation of survival technologies and tactics that most believe possible. We don't live on the beachfront in Kiribati, Tuvalu, and tens of others countries who face economic and cultural ruin in the rather short term.

Jeremy Leggett is an author, founder and executive chairman of Solarcentury, a solar energy company, and ambassador to the Global Observatory at Copenhagen.

Graciela Chichilnisky: NGOs do not always understand clearly how technical things work. For example they sometimes fear that carbon markets will not help



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reduce emissions – when in fact the market only functions with firm emissions limits nation by nation and is thus a stricter agreement on world emissions than carbon taxes, which NGOs sometimes prefer.

On the other hand, carbon markets are agreements – only new cleaner technology that carbon markets helps create can physically deliver carbon reductions.

Copenhagen is only about agreements – the actual physical work is not done here.

However NGOs play an important role. They are the voice of reason and often distill public opinion. They serve to represent the public – so if there is a misunderstanding we must work harder to clarify it.

So far all drafts circulated in Copenhagen support widely the carbon market for the reasons just explained, and also for its flexibility. There seems to be wide consensus in this respect so far.

Copenhagen must respond to the public opinion – the people of the world NGOs are a voice for global consciousness and they are most welcome as such.

Graciela Chichilnisky is the architect of the carbon market of the Kyoto Protocol and the co-author of Saving Kyoto.

Lord Browne of Madingley: The role that NGOs have played in the debate so far has been crucial. Without their relentless campaigning and pressure it is unlikely that the international community could have come even this far. From a personal perspective it was with the help of some NGOs that I came to realise the potential dangers from climate change when few others in the oil industry wanted to engage with the issue.

Their hard work has rightly been rewarded with a prominent voice in the negotiations and they are entitled to drive a hard bargain. But strong solutions require all players to recognise their proper roles. The role of government is to set the new rules of the game, while businesses will provide the delivery in response to those rules. As well as providing advice to governments on how rules should be set, the role of the NGO is to ensure the other parties stick to their promises.

What we have witnessed this week is the NGOs playing their role as the world's conscience. To some this might seem like 'tough love' but it is not 'sabotage'. There is little doubt that the NGOs, like the rest of us, recognise that no deal at Copenhagen is the most dangerous possible outcome.

Lord Browne is president of the Royal Academy of Engineering, managing director at Riverstone LLC, and was chief executive of BP from 1995 to 2007.

Vivienne Cox: NGOs have a valuable role to play in highlighting specific issues but they usually represent only one perspective while governments have to take a much broader view. The danger NGOs can pose is in misjudging the event and communicating a response that encourages or supports those who want to do nothing. If the NGOs (or more likely some of them who will get airtime because the media will use those who shout loudest from the edge) trash the outcome and communicate wholly negatively then that breaks momentum and encourages those who want to denigrate the entire process. The lesson for NGO leadership is: Don't endorse the arguments made by those who don't want the outcome you want. Words matter. Choose them carefully and take territory in the debate. Leave nothing to those who would celebrate if the talks fail.

Vivienne Cox is chairman of Climate Change Capital.

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