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MAKING THE **GREEN NEW DEAL** WORK FOR THE WORKING PEOPLE OF ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

This is a short guidebook on the Global Green New Deal (GGND) proposed by the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) in 2009 and the Green New Deal (GND) initiative being declared by different countries in response to the UNEP’s call for GGND.

The point of this guidebook is that the GGND and GND’s are indeed crucial in the fight against the threat of global warming to humanity. But there are GND’s and GND’s. Not all GND’s are aligned with the interests of the working people, especially in the Asia-Pacific where GND’s are hardly discussed in the ranks of the organized masses – be they be in the trade and peasant unions, street vendor and home-based workers’ organizations, transport associations, cooperatives, indigenous people communities, fisherfolk movements and other organizations/associations of workers.

The author argues that GND’s can only be meaningful for the working people if these GND’s reflect their collective interests and if they are at the helm, driving the GND’s forward. The guidebook is an elaboration of these key points.

FORGING A GREEN SOCIAL CONTRACT: A MUST-DO FOR ASIA’S LABOR MOVEMENTS

“Green-minded” politicians in the world have been spouting about the importance of a “green new deal” (GND), or a blueprint to stop the catastrophic global warming of Planet Earth. They are joined by CEOs who have embraced a green CSR framework in corporate operations.

The discourse on GND is loudest in Europe and North America. Recently, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and Werner Hoyer, President of the European Investment Bank, reiterated the call of the UN Environmental Pro-

gramme (UNEP) for a “global green deal” on the de-carbonization of the world in order to limit the rise in global temperature to 1.5 degree Celsius (von der Leyen and Hoyer, 2021). The two are proposing investments in green energy solutions, breakthrough green technologies (such as clean hydrogen and green energy storage), and circular energy (with focus on the reuse or recycling of materials).

In the United States, Washington’s commitment to the Paris Agreement of 2015 on climate change has been revived with the election of Joe Biden. He appointed John Kerry, a strong advocate of clean energy, as America’s climate ambassador. Further, Biden declared his Administration’s goal of pushing for a \$2 trillion investment package for clean energy to make America’s electricity carbon-free by 2035 and for the country to achieve net-zero greenhouse emissions by 2050 (Snaith, 2021).

But within the Democratic Party of Biden, there are voices calling for even much bolder measures. One of them is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who has been articulating the message of the young visionary leaders of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA): climate change is a labor issue. Ocasio-Cortez, a waitress-turned-congresswoman in New York, has a resolution seeking a “10-year national mobilization” to reduce carbon emissions (Kurtzleben, 2019). The mobilization program envisions the following critical components:

- ▶ sourcing of electricity only from renewable and zero-emissions power plants
- ▶ building “smart” power grids to provide affordable electricity
- ▶ upgrading all existing buildings and infrastructures to be climate-ready
- ▶ building resiliency against climate-change risks and disasters
- ▶ funding communities affected by climate change

- ▶ restoring forests to remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere,
- ▶ working with farmers to cut emissions from the agricultural sector, and
- ▶ creation of millions of high-wage jobs in a green economy.

The rationale for the DSA’s GND is well-articulated in the book *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (2019), written by Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battitone, Daniel Cohen and Thea Riofrancos. The existential climate change threat is a labor issue and requires solutions in support of the working people. In short, a GND is meaningless if the social and labor dimensions are not spelled out. A GND is inextricably linked to finding solutions to other societal problems such as poverty, unemployment and inequality.

The GND, as advanced by Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA, has received the support of the International Trade Union Council (ITUC) and workers’ movements in a number of countries. The ITUC itself has a long-running campaign enlisting workers and other segments of society to join the global campaign against global warming. The ITUC explained that there are “no jobs on a dead planet”. It summarized beautifully the critical importance of the battle against climate change as follows:

“WE know the science is unequivocal -- The world’s temperature is rising, current trends will lead us to a 4°C average increase or more in this century and without urgent, ambitious action we will face irreversible changes in our climate.

“WE have policy -- The ITUC wants the world’s governments to agree on climate action and give us a fighting chance to limit the temperature rise to 2 de-

grees or less. “WE are out of time -- Climate-related catastrophes such as cyclones, floods, drought, fires, melting glaciers, season changes and more are increasing and hurting working people now. Their impacts will only become stronger within 15 years – this will destroy more communities and jobs.

“WE demand industrial transformation -- Science tells us we need to urgently stabilise carbon emissions at 44 GigaTonnes. Business as usual gets us to 59 GigaTonnes by 2020. It doesn’t add up. All our economic sectors must change. We demand to be part of the industrial transformation with universal access to breakthrough technologies that will make our industries and our jobs sustainable for workers everywhere.

“WE demand a just transition -- We have played our role in UN negotiations and fought and won commitments to ‘Just Transition’. Now we want to see the transition happen on the ground, including through investment in new green jobs, skills, income protection and other necessary measures implemented everywhere, with adequate funding for the poorest and most vulnerable of nations.”

Fine. The problem is that the workers’ movements in the Philippines and other Asian countries are not making the same level of noise being created by the GND labor advocates in America and Europe. GND is often seen as the advocacy of the do-gooders among the conscience-strick-

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en business people, middle-class environmentalists, Church activists, concerned academics, investigative journalists and environmental conservationists. Governments readily call for tripartite conferences on minimum wage and employment issues, and yet, there are hardly any on climate change.

Fleshing out the GND is also problematic. In Asia, the call of UNEP for a global GND is interpreted to be mainly a plea to governments to reduce the GHG emissions issue on a country by country basis. Hence, the numerous discussions, seminars and conferences are on energy transition and exclude representatives of the the trade and peasant unions, street vendor and home-based workers’ organizations, transport associations, cooperatives, indigenous people communities, fisherfolk movements and other organizations/associations of workers.

To repeat, climate change is a labor issue. To tame the climate change risks, we can only agree with Ocasio-Cortez, national mobilization involving the working people is a must.

NO JOBS ON A DEAD PLANET, BUT JOBS ARE ALREADY CRUMBLING - TODAY!

The International Trade Union Council (ITUC) summarized in one sentence the ultimate outcome of an unmitigated warming of Planet Earth: There are no jobs on a dead planet.

Climate scientists gathered by the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) agree that should there be no decisive efforts of mankind to limit the rise in the global temperature to less than 2.0 degree Celsius, Planet Earth will be dead within a century or less. Parts of the planet will be uninhabitable, and the other parts inhospitable (Wallace-Wells, 2017). This, in brief, is what

the five major reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the UN, summarized in a 2014 *Synthesis Report* (Pauchari and Meyer, 2014), have been saying: end of human life within a century unless governments around the world get united in decisively implementing the needed mitigation and adaptation programs outlined in the 2015 Paris Agreement.

As it is, the internet is full of climate-related doomsday stories. Scary but they happen to be backed up by climate science. Climate scientists themselves keep on projecting the different catastrophic scenarios. Example: sea rise, which has been happening gradually, can soar up by as much as three meters. Asian mega cities like Metro Manila, Singapore, Penang, Jakarta, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, Mumbai, Chennai, Chittagong and Dhaka shall live in a watery world. The accelerated sea rise is bound to happen, partly due to the melting of the gigantic permafrosts in the Arctic and Antarctic poles. In turn, the melting of the permafrosts can release huge amount of frozen methane (now considered by climate scientists as more potent than carbon dioxide as a heat trapper). Hence, the melting of the permafrosts and ice caps around the world is bound to intensify further the global warming process.

And what happens to communities in the dry lands? They will be wiped out by killer heat waves, unbreathable air, droughts, collapse of agriculture, famine, etc. End of the world indeed?

All these grim scenarios have captured the imagination of the climate scientists and the climate social activists, who are all working hard in pushing governments and international development agencies to exert extra efforts to save the world from a climate catastrophe. The problem is that



Photo by Inimafoto

for many among the workers and ordinary citizens in different Asian countries, the climate crisis is seen as only one among the “future” threats that Asian governments have to address. It is not comparable to the Covid infection or job displacement arising from the pandemic, both of which require immediate attention and action. Hence, Asian workers’ movements – trade and peasant unions, street vendor and home-based workers organizations, transport associations, cooperatives, etc. – hardly submit any formal petitions for their governments to act now, that is, to fulfill the mitigation-adaptation pledges they have made under the Paris Agreement of 2015. Act now to prevent a catastrophic future.

So how do we make the climate change mitigation-adaptation program a mainstream must-do advocacy work for the working people of Asia and the organizations they are affiliated to? And how do we also involve in this battle the solo, micro and small entrepreneurs who constitute the largest segments of the business community?

One good approach is to highlight the fact that the crisis has been happening in the present tense, and the jobs have been collapsing – now -- in various sectors of the economy due to the climate crisis. The point is that global warming is not a new phenomenon. It has been building up since the start of the industrial era. The problem is that the accumulation of the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the consequent warming of the Earth are now at a perilous level. The disruptive and deadly impact of climate change is already being manifested in the heat waves, droughts, strong typhoons, more warmer days and rising seas occurring around the world.

The most concrete evidence of the risks associated with climate change is the increasing number and destructive power of

typhoons or cyclones visiting a number of Asian countries. Super-typhoon Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 alone killed over 130,000 people. The Philippines, which averages 20 typhoons a year, was devastated in 2013 by Haiyan (Yolanda), with a super 5 category. Yolanda killed over 10,000 people in one city, Tacloban, and wrought havoc on half of the archipelago.

As outlined in the IPCC’s 2014 *Synthesis Report* (Padchauri and Meyer, 2014), the following CC-related phenomena are already affecting people’s health and livelihoods around the world:

- ▶ *Heat waves/warm spells* – wild fires, reduced agricultural yields, increased water demand, deteriorating quality of water, health problems (especially for the elderly), reduced quality of life;
- ▶ *Droughts* – land degradation, lower yields, crop failure, livestock deaths, more water stress, food and water shortage, water-and-food-borne diseases, water shortage in communities; and
- ▶ *Sea rise* -- salinization of irrigation water, reduced fresh-water availability, risks associated with increased flooding, reduced coastal protection.

On the climate crisis in Asia, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) came out with a detailed discussion of climate risks facing the region in the book *A Region at Risk: The Human Dimensions of Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific* (2017). The book highlighted the following:

- ▶ *Vulnerability of urban areas* – Half of the population of Asia-Pacific are now in the cities and urbanized towns. Soaring urban temperatures put people at risk to various problems: deteriorating air quality, respiratory diseases, increased electricity demand, and rising human heat stress. In addition, there are the problems associated with sea

rise for the coastal cities.

- ▶ *Forced migration* -- Families have been moving out of places vulnerable to typhoons such as the coastal areas. Similarly, families have been moving out of mountainous and agricultural lands that are suffering from droughts. They are climate refugees in every sense of the term. Relatedly, the decision of the more capable members of poor families to accept menial and low-paying jobs overseas can be interpreted as a response to job and income displacement due to climate disasters.
- ▶ *Impact on human health* – Climate change naturally affects human health. The World Health Organization (WHO) has been investigating the climate impacts on health such as diarrheal diseases, stunting among children, heat-related mortality among the elderly and rise of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue. On diarrhea, the experience of Pakistan in 2010, after a record-breaking flood affected 20 million people and caused 1,800 fatalities, indicates that the floods triggered the outbreak of diarrhea and other diseases, especially among the children. Of course, heat waves are also major killers. In 2015 in India, with ambient temperature reaching 48 degree Celsius for several days, more than 2,300 people died due to heat stroke and dehydration.

The ADB also pointed out that Asia’s global value chain (GVC) production, the internationalized system of industrial production involving a chain of factories located in different Asian countries, is at risk, especially when there are climate disasters in one or several GVC locations.

One can go on and on listing the adverse impact of global warming on jobs, health and overall wellness of the working people of every society. The challenge is how

should the workers’ movements, representing the working people, act on a global emergency called climate change?

A GREEN SOCIAL CONTRACT WITHOUT THE PEOPLE IS ANTI-SOCIAL

Like the Covid pandemic, the climate crisis is a threat to everyone. It is a threat to civilization. It clearly requires, policy-wise, a collective whole-of-society approach. All sectors of society, particularly the working people, should and must be involved.

In this context, the position taken by US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the authors of the book *A Planet to Win* (Aronoff et al., 2019) is the right governance approach. Their vision of a “Green New Deal” (GND) requires the mobilization of entire society. And the task of “greening” the economy is linked to the performance of two other major societal tasks: putting the economy on the path of sustainability while addressing social and economic inequality. In short, it is a social contract undertaken by the whole society for a clear social purpose.

Unfortunately, the GND’s being floated in many countries in Asia and other parts of the world are social contracts only in name. Social and labor clauses are either missing or are written in an abstract or obtuse manner. Above all, there is no participation of the working people in the drafting of these GNDs. The overwhelming preoccupation of government agencies handling the climate and environmental issues is how to tinker or juggle the numbers on the mix of fossil fuels and renewables in order to show how their respective countries are complying with the mitigation targets of the Paris Agreement. But such an exercise, usually ending in a so-called “net-zero” emission target statement, is not a social contract.

Of course, the concept of a social contract



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between the governor and the governed is not new. Political scientists and philosophers have long been debating different theories on the social contract, from the divine right of kings to govern to the more enlightened concept that men and women, constituting a community or society, allow themselves to be under the rules of a government which guarantees justice, security and social protection to all citizens.

The “new deal” of US President Franklin Roosevelt belongs to the latter category. Based on his promise of a “new deal” to a desperate and jobless America, Roosevelt launched a massive government stimulus program – unheard of in the free-trade era of the early 20th century – to create millions of jobs during the Great Depression of 1929-33 (Kelly, 2020). Most of the jobs created turned out to be environmental in character such as the hiring of men to plant trees, build flood barriers, fight forest fires, maintain roads and trails, and manage the National Parks. A Tennessee Valley Authority was established to build dams, stop flooding and generate affordable electricity for rural America. The social and labor aspects of the new deal included the passage of laws supportive of workers’ bargaining rights, enrolment in social security and financing of houses for the American working masses. Roosevelt’s “new deal” was in a sense the original “green new deal” or “green social contract”.

Now fast forward to 2009, the year the global financial crisis (GFC) broke out and clobbered stock markets around the world and pushed the global economy on the brink. The UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) used the GFC as an opportunity to ask the world leaders to address the GFC challenge by embracing a “Global Green New Deal” (GGND), which is similar in intent to Roosevelt’s new deal. The GGND appeal was specifically directed to the G20 countries, which according to UNEP

“produce 90 per cent of the global GDP, 80 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and command much of the world’s annual US\$150-250 billion fossil fuel subsidies.” The UNEP GGND advisory is win-win: revive the global economy and boost employment “while accelerating the fight against climate change, environmental degradation and poverty” (UNEP, 2009a).

According to UNEP, the GGND (UNEP, 2009b) can achieve the following:

- ▶ Creation of millions of “green jobs” in the expanding renewable energy sector, bolstered by the finding that investments in renewables create two or three times more jobs compared to the conventional energy development;
- ▶ Enhancement of the energy security of countries as they become less dependent on the production and importation of fossil fuels, which are the primary cause of emissions and geo-political and geo-economic conflicts;
- ▶ Reduction of climate risks, for inaction leads to higher costs;
- ▶ Development of a green pathway for the realization of productive and sustained cooperation among government, private sector and other social actors; and
- ▶ Greenhouse gas mitigation.

The UNEP concluded that the GGND means many winners. The GGND lays “the foundation for a new, self-sustaining cycle of green growth globally, while steering the world on a course to end the scourge of energy poverty and avoid the threat of dangerous climate instability” (UNEP, 2009b).

The overall framework of the GGND is that decarbonization should go hand in hand with economic development. But why

are governments, especially those from the advanced countries, hesitant to make commitments to the GGND?

As it is, 12 years after the GGND proposal of UNEP, the world is still struggling to find ways to stop the catastrophic future arising from the runaway warming of Planet Earth. Instead of taking the GGND seriously by realigning their national budgets and stimulus spending based on the GGND framework, most countries, with the exception of a few, simply went ahead with old-style budgeting unmindful of the urgent task of budgeting to combat the climate crisis. The phasing out of fossil-dependent power plants such as those running on coal, oil and gas did not happen, as monitored by the climate tracker in Berlin and as reflected in the continuing accumulation of GHG emissions in the Earth’s atmosphere.

Obviously, the transition to clean energy system has become a slow-by-slow process because those involved in the transition include the big investors in the fossil-reliant power sector. They happen to have powerful backers in government. They are naturally hesitant to give up profitable commercial interests on existing power systems despite the emerging fact that renewables are getting cheaper and cheaper.

So how can governments and the big business players in the power sector be nudged or persuaded or even forced to go green? The answer is increase the pressure from below, from the citizenry, from the working people. There are examples given by the Transnational Institute based in Amsterdam (Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017) on how such pressure can help transform private/privatized public utilities to go green. One outstanding case is that of Hamburg, Germany, where a citizens’ movement succeeded in pushing the Hamburg local government to accept their

collective demand for the city to go green and shift to renewable-energy generation (e.g., wind and solar).

The point is that it is not enough that a purportedly green social contract has social and labor clauses for the benefit of the people. A social contract is a contract with the people. Therefore, the citizenry should not only be informed and consulted but they should also be involved in the design, planning and implementation of the social contract. People should not be treated as mere objects of development.

It is in this context that the workers’ movements, which represent the working masses, should and must play a major and distinct role. They should help shape the social contract based on the people’s interests and, yes, they should lead in the implementation of the contract. In short, they should own the contract.

A GREEN SOCIAL CONTRACT SHOULD ADDRESS LABOR CONCERNS

Many governments around the world have been crafting “energy transition” and other climate-readiness programs in response to the Paris Agreement 2015 (PA 2015) and the plea of the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) for a “global green new deal” (GGND). They automatically label these programs as the “green new deal” (GND) for their respective countries. Thus, one sees a proliferation of GND’s being advertised by different governments to show to the world that they are cooperating with UNEP in stopping the cataclysmic rise of global temperature beyond 2.0 degree Celsius.

But there are GND’s and GND’s. A number of the publicized GND’s are programs crafted by a select few – by government’s economic and climate/environmental officials, with inputs from invited academic researchers, corporate leaders and rep-

resentatives of international development agencies. There are no inputs from the workers’ movements, civil society organizations and other sectors of society. Hence, Calling these GND’s as green new deals or green social contracts is highly questionable. A modern and democratic social contract requires people’s involvement in the design and implementation of any social contract dealing with existential threats like climate change.

Moreover, there are critical social and labor concerns that have been neglected or ignored in many of these GND’s. Below are three major concerns that should be reflected in a genuine green social contract:

- ▶ **First, climate justice.** The climate crisis is also a question of justice. Who, in the first place, is responsible for rising global temperature?

The reality is that all countries have been contributing to global warming by burning fossil fuels to run transport and provide electricity for their populations, raising livestock and agricultural crops (which release methane) and so on. But some are big emitters and others are marginal GHG producers. In particular, the advanced or rich countries have been accumulating a high “carbon debt” since the start of the industrial era (circa 16th/17th centuries). With less than 20 per cent of the world’s population, they account for half of the global GHG emission total.

It was only in the last three or four decades that China and India have joined the club of big GHG emitters. But then these two countries have large populations, which means their per capita emission is much lower compared to Europe, North America, Japan and Australia.

And the rest of the developing world? They contribute little GHG emissions, and

yet, they are the most vulnerable to climate change risks. In Asia, six countries are included in the most vulnerable countries in the world. They are Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam (Amponin and Evans, 2016). And yet, the contribution of each of these countries to the global emissions is less than one per cent.

This is why in the name of climate justice, climate and labor activists are asking that funds from the developed countries be allocated to help the developing countries build up their climate readiness program, which includes varied mitigation and adaptation projects. The issue here is justice, not a question of charity. This is why in the climate change negotiations among countries, the principle of “common and differentiated responsibilities” (CDR) has come to be recognized.

However, developing countries of the Global South should not be totally dependent on CDR-based funding from the developed countries of the Global North. Waiting patiently for CDR manna to fall on their laps can take forever. With or without the CDR, they should make positive or affirmative action on various mitigation and adaptation measures needed in their respective countries while continuously badgering the Global North about their climate debt.

Also, there is another dimension of climate justice within each developing country. The rich who profited from burning fossil fuels and ransacking nature (forests, minerals, etc.) live in the most protected areas of the country, not in the places where their exploitative resource practices or their GHG polluting plants can be found. In short, the fight for climate justice is a fight for equality and should be waged at both the global and national levels.

► **Second, development of new growth paradigm.** Related to climate justice is the challenge of adjusting or overhauling the economic model that the developed countries used in growing their respective economies while profusely emitting GHG gases along the way. This model has been refined by the neo-liberal economists into a globalization model, with the multinationals on top of a global system promoting fossil-based global production and consumption with limited rules under a liberalized global trading regime.

The UNDP, in a special report (HDR, 2007/08) on global warming, called attention to the fact that the poor are the ones “bearing the brunt of climate change”. The UNDP labeled the inability of countries of the world to stop global warming as an “outrage to the conscience of mankind”. Further, the UNDP (2007) wrote:

“Carbon-intensive economic growth is symptomatic of a deeper problem. One of the harshest lessons taught by climate change is that the economic model which drives growth and the profligate consumption in rich nations that goes with it, is ecologically unsustainable.” (p. 15)

A good illustration of the linkage between environmental degradation and globalization is the experience of Southeast Asia in pursuing growth in the 1980s-1990s, the decades Southeast Asian countries fully embraced globalization. The book *A Land on Fire: The Environmental Consequences of the Southeast Asian Boom* (2003) documented the following GHG-emitting and environmentally-degrading developments:

► Excessive commercialization of tourism, “an industry without smoke-

stacks”, which has degraded untouched lands and beaches through the unregulated construction of resorts, beach hotels and golf courses

- Construction of numerous dams (for hydro energy), which has dislocated communities and disrupted bio-diversity systems;
- Expanding aquaculture;
- Massive urbanization, and
- Widespread logging.

On logging, the region also caused global concerns among environmentalists when Indonesia allowed private investors (involving Singaporean and Malaysian funders) burn large swathes of forests in Sumatra, Kalimantan and other islands from the 1980s to the mid-2010s. The ensuing haze resulting from the waves of forest fires became a cross-border concern as the haze affected the neighboring countries, reaching as far as Manila and Phnom Penh. The forest fires and the resulting GHG emissions elevated Indonesia to the circle of the top ten GHG emitters of the world, after India and Russia (McDonnel, 2015).

Unfortunately, the above Southeast Asian environmental story is also the story of China, India and other Asian countries in the last four decades. The environment has literally become hostage to the “free market” requirements of economic globalization.

This brings us then to the challenge of re-thinking the dominant neo-liberal export-oriented economic model, which is now questioned by many as unsustainable. Imagine if all Asian, African and Latin American countries will become dynamic export dynamos like China. Can the world afford three or five or more China’s emitting GHG gases at the same level as China today because of the requirements of export production? Where will they source

the materials, minerals and fuels to make their export offensive succeed like what China did? And where are the markets where they will dump their products?

During the 2008-2010 global financial crisis (GFC), many economists agreed on one major conclusion: under runaway globalization, there is a tendency for the world to over-produce in a global market which is unable to absorb or consume everything. The over-production/under-consumption contradiction is at the roots of the GFC. Another related conclusion, propounded by trade unionists and labor economists, is that the over-production phenomenon is due to the global Race to the Bottom involving the multinationals (MNCs) and host countries. The Global Race to the Bottom means MNCs and host countries tend to relax the rules protecting not only labor rights but also environmental, health and social standards. This system is obviously unsustainable.

Sustainable development defined

This is why as early as 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development, in the seminal book *Our Common Future*, called the attention of the world on the urgent need for a rebalancing of the economy – at the national as well as global levels. The Commission came up with a famous definition of what is sustainable development, as follows:

“...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

► *The concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and*

► *The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.”* (p.43)

In line with the above development framework, the Commission listed the following “strategic imperatives” that different countries must address in charting sustainable development path, namely:

- strategizing growth for redistribution and poverty reduction
- changing the quality of growth to make it less material-and-energy intensive
- meeting the essential needs of the population for jobs, food, energy, water and sanitation
- ensuring a sustainable level of population
- conserving and enhancing the resource base
- reorienting technology and managing risk to respond to the challenges of sustainable development, and
- merging environment and economics in decision making.

The IPCC and UNEP, through the various reports on climate change and sustainable development they have been issuing, have been reiterating the importance of the above environmental-economic guideposts propounded by the Commission report, also called the Brundtland Report (after the chair Bro Brundtland). It is obvious that the one-size-fits-all formula advanced by some neo-liberal economists through institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) collides with the above imperatives outlined by the World Commission on Environment and Development. The same holds true for the export-or-perish development framework often articulated by the neo-liberal globalizers.

What the Commission, IPCC and UNEP are asking is for countries, big and small,



Photo by Eva Eljas

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rich and poor, do a rebalancing of their respective economies based on the above framework of sustainable development.

Just transformation and just transition.

Making the economy sustainable while minimizing the risks posed by climate change requires a program of transformation, in fact, a series of transformations. The climate scientists have reduced the programs for transformation into two categories:

- a. **Mitigation.** This simply means reduction of GHG emissions. The Paris Agreement of 2015 requires UN Member States to collectively reduce GHG emissions to a level that will prevent global temperature rising beyond 2.0 degree Celsius above pre-industrial era. The ideal target is 1.5 degree Celsius. Based on this global target, countries are asked to make their respective GHG reduction commitments, expressed in what is called as the “**Nationally Determined Contributions**” (NDCs).

How to reduce GHG emissions? The most obvious is to phase out reliance on fossil fuel to generate electricity, run factories and move vehicles. The energy system has to shift to the renewables (wind, solar, hydro, etc.) and get out of coal, oil and gas. Also part of the mitigation program is reforestation because forests serve as a “sink” for carbon dioxide. Hence, the UN program promoting **REDD – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation**. Still part of mitigation is the development and use of low-carbon technologies and materials, and the shifting of chemical agriculture to organic.

- b. **Adaptation.** This means capacitating people to manage climate-related risks such as floods, drought, storm, etc. without suffering reversals in human

development. Some experts claims that adaptation is more important than mitigation for vulnerable developing food, health care, education, etc.), and resiliency training and development.

Adaptation has given birth to a program called “**disaster risk reduction management**” (DRRM), which is popular among CSOs and government agencies working with vulnerable communities. Adaptation should involve: IEC on geo hazards, information on various types of climate risks, institutions for risk management (e.g., quick-response brigades, early warning system), development of social protection programs (people’s access to food, health care, etc.).

Developing the twin programs of mitigation and adaptation entails transformation of a number of socio-economic programs or processes in place in a given country. The most challenging among these is “energy transition” – from fossil dependence to reliance on renewables. Overhauling the power sector is expensive and the players in the sector are big investors who are hesitant to phase out profitable fossil-based undertakings and make new investments on the renewables without certainty about returns. These players happen to have powerful backers in the political system.

But despite the hesitance and even resistance of the fossil investors, there has been a growing acceptability of renewables over fossils around the world. This is a product of decades of campaigning by the environmentalists and continuing scientific exploration on how to make renewables cheaper and more efficient compared to the fossil fuels. In a number of advanced capitalist countries, coal and oil power plants are already being phased out. However, in most of the developing world, the fossils remain dominant. This gives rise to the fears by climate campaigners that the target phas-

ing out of coal worldwide by 2050 will not happen for most countries. It is indeed a big battle.

However, another battle has been going on in the transformation arena. How to ensure that job holders in fossil-dependent industries are not unduly displaced when these industries go green or give way to green plans of the government? How to help affected communities? Is there a just transition program for the workers and the communities?

Just transition means transition to a better life, to a job-full economy, to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy. If the transformation program leads to joblessness and hopelessness for the workers, the transformation program becomes unjust even if the program is carried out in the name of greening. This also means there are no efforts to plan the transition for the workers and the community in a manner that benefits all.

A good example of unjust transition is the policy decision made by the Philippine government to phase out the ubiquitous “Pinoy jeepney”, a popular vehicle used by the masses. The idea is to replace the Pinoy jeepney, a vintage post-World War II vehicle blamed by some transport officials for the pollution and traffic congestions in urban areas. Under the “jeepney modernization program”, only modernized jeepneys using “cleaner” LPG-powered or Euro-4 compliant engines are allowed on the streets. Additionally, these jeepneys, twice bigger than the regular Pinoy, shall have features such as air-conditioning, GPS, a CCTV camera, Wifi, and an automated fare collection system.

The jeepney modernization program was pushed by the transport bureaucrats despite the resistance of thousands of jeepney drivers and small jeepney operators. Why the resistance? The cost of the

new jeepney is P1.6 to 1.8 million, while a brand-new jeepney has a price tag of only P600,000. Moreover, the transport bureaucrats made new rules that are difficult to follow for the traditional jeepney drivers. There was no just transition program put in place. In fact, the jeepney drivers and small jeepney operators were not consulted on the design, pricing and implementation of the modern jeepney.

The lesson is that environmental reforms are meaningless if there are no just transition programs for the workers and the affected communities. This is the reason why the International Trade Union Council (ITUC) has been campaigning for the development of just transition programs world-wide. On adaptation and mitigation programs, the ITUC demands that **early vulnerability assessment** be made and that consultations and dialogues with all stakeholders, especially with the trade unions, be conducted on the design, policy and monitoring of climate change policies.

To conclude, the seven (7) strategic imperatives suggested by the Brundtland Commission above can serve as the best guide in crafting mitigation-adaptation programs as well as transformation-transition programs. There is a need for coherence in climate and economic policy formulation and implementation.

CONCLUSION: ASIA NEEDS A NEW CONTRACT -- GREEN, SOCIAL, INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE

Asia today is reeling from a multiple of interrelated crises – Covid 19 pandemic, climate emergency, extreme inequality and economic recession.

Like climate change, Covid 19 has been wreaking havoc in Asia and all over the world. The pandemic, which started from Wuhan, has not run its course. With so

many variants of the virus sprouting and with the limited number of vaccines available to the region (excepting China), Asia will be grappling with the pandemic up to 2022 and beyond.

The situation in the region is bad. All sub-regional groups – East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Central Asia – are debilitated by the pandemic, with their respective national health sector overwhelmed and caught unprepared to deal with the fast spread of the virus. Four populous countries – India, Pakistan, Indonesia and the Philippines -- are hit hardest, with hundreds of thousands infected and tens of thousands of deaths recorded. An ADB study estimated that the collapse of Asian economies would be between minus 6.0 to minus 9.5 per cent of the GDP in 2020, and minus 3.6 to 6.3 per cent of the GDP in 2021. South Asia, Central Asia and Southeast Asia are the most affected sub-regional grouping of countries in Asia (*ADB Briefs*, December 2020).

The pandemic comes at a bad time for the Asian economy. The famous Factory Asia, the international chain of industrial production or global value chain (GVC) set up by multinational investors in Asia, has been fracturing due to two major disruptors: Fourth Industrial Revolution (especially the rise of automation and robotization in production) and the US-China trade wars. Covid strengthened the fracturing trend, with the logistics industry that connects the GVC system also being disrupted.

At the same time, development agencies have been raising alarms over the deepening economic and social inequality in each of the Asian countries. China, India and the Southeast Asian countries are among those with high Gini coefficients or high levels of inequality in terms of income distribution. The root causes for growing inequality have been a source of deep an-

ger for the trade unions and are well-documented (ITUC-AP, 2015; Ofreneo, 2013; Oxfam, 2015). These are:

- ▶ The Race to the Bottom culture among employers. Casual or short-term hiring practices are common. Footloose capital in the garments and other low-technology labor-intensive industries fly in and out of production sites, usually EPZ zones, to avoid unionism and exploit cheap and malleable labor.
- ▶ Jobless growth due to limited job creation in GVC industries. No country in Asia, not even China, can claim full or near full employment due to the GVCs.
- ▶ Low quality jobs in the large informal sector. South Asian countries have large pools of labor in the informal sector, as high as 80 to 90 per cent of the total labor force; in non-industrialized Southeast Asia (minus Singapore and Brunei), informal sector employment is around two-thirds of the total employed.
- ▶ Economic restructuring with limited job creation for the displaced.
- ▶ Impact of the technology revolution on industry and employment. Wages are highest in the ICT sector but low and declining in others.

Soaring inequality in the region is reflected in Asia’s inability to meet all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pledged by UN Member States in 2015. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, in its 2019 and 2020 Reports, openly declared that Asia is on course “to miss all” the SDG targets. Asia is lagging in realizing some of the SDG targets and failing in meeting the other SDG targets. ESCAP’s SDG scorecard for Asia:

- ▶ progress is below those posted in 2000 for clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8) and responsible consumption and production (Goal 12).

- ▶ no or little progress on zero hunger (Goal 2), industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9), reducing inequalities (Goal 10), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), climate action (Goal 13), life below water (Goal 14), life on land (Goal 15) and peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16).
- ▶ progress is insufficient on no poverty (Goal 1), good health and well-being (Goal 3), quality education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), and affordable and clean energy (Goal 7).
- ▶ slow progress in strengthening partnerships (Goal 17).
- ▶ more than half of Asia-Pacific’s total employment is in the informal sector;
- ▶ in a few countries, some 15-20 per cent of children from ages 5-17 are engaged in child labour;
- ▶ on average, 2,000 people die every day in traffic accidents in the region
- ▶ 325 million people still live without electricity.

On the whole, Asia has multiple crises on major spheres of societal life – health, economic, social and environmental. There is clearly a need for a social and economic rebalancing. Asia needs a new social contract for such a rebalancing.

Coincidentally, the present UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, has been reflecting on the same multiple problems that afflict not only Asia but the whole world. In his Nelson Mandela lecture in July 2020 in New York, Guterres issued a similar call: the world needs a new social contract for a new system of global governance. He said:

“People want social and economic systems that work for everyone. They want their human rights and human freedoms to be respected. They want a say in decisions that affect their lives.”

“The New Social Contract, between Governments, people, civil society, business and more, must integrate employment, sustainable development and social protection, based on equal rights and opportunities for all.”

Further, he intoned:

“Let’s face the facts.

“The global political and economic system is not delivering on critical public goods: public health, climate action, sustainable development, peace.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has brought home the tragic disconnect between self-interest and the common interest: and the huge gaps in governance structures and ethical frameworks.

“To close those gaps, and to make the **New Social Contract** possible, we need a New Global Deal to ensure that power, wealth and opportunities are shared more broadly and fairly at the international level.

“A new model for global governance must be based on full, inclusive and equal participation in global institutions”. This new governance should be based on “a fair globalization, on the rights and dignity of every human being, on living in balance with nature, on taking account of the rights of future generations, and on success measured in human rather than economic terms, is the best way to change this.”

In his Nelson Mandela speech, Guterres cited the various problems ailing humanity which necessitates an overhaul of the existing global economic and political governance system. Four of the major problems deserve to be emphasized:

- ▶ the Covid 19 pandemic and how it has bared the “fragility of the our world”,
- ▶ the climate crisis that is pushing the world to the brink of extinction,
- ▶ the one-sided trade and financial system that locks the poor countries into perpetual state of underdevelopment, and
- ▶ the vast and widespread social-economic inequality that “defines our time”.

So what should be the specific clauses that a global social contract or an Asian social contract should contain? For the International Trade Union Council (ITUC), there are five, namely:

- ▶ Creation of climate-friendly jobs with Just Transition. Job-creating industrial transformation to achieve net-zero carbon emissions, along with jobs in health, education and other quality public services.
- ▶ Rights for all workers, regardless of their employment arrangements.
- ▶ Universal social protection, with the establishment of a Social Protection Fund for the least wealthy countries.
- ▶ Equality. Ending all discrimination, such as by race or gender, to ensure that all people can share in prosperity

and that the appalling concentration of wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many is undone.

- ▶ Inclusion. To combat the growing power of monopolies and oligarchs, ensure that developing countries can actually develop their economies and guarantee tax systems that provide the income vital for governments to meet the needs of people and the planet. And inclusive approach to tackling the Covid-19 pandemic is paramount, both in terms of economic support and as well as universal access to testing, treatment and vaccines.

We say Yes to the social contract proposal of the UN Secretary General and to the five-point demand of the ITUC. However, we would like to add that at the national level in each country, the social contract should not only reflect the foregoing UN/ITUC demands but should also adhere closely to the seven guideposts propounded by the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development. A social contract should be green, social, inclusive and sustainable.

In making such a contract, the UN Secretary General is correct: it should be the joint undertaking of Governments, people, civil society, business and other sectors of society, and “must integrate employment, sustainable development and social protection, based on equal rights and opportunities for all.” It is a whole-of-society approach involving everyone, especially the working masses.



Annex A:

Why are climate advocates and civil society organizations adamant at the behavior of the ADB, AIIB and government financial institutions?

The overall target of the Paris Agreement of 2015 is to keep the rise in global temperature not to go beyond the maximum 2.0 degree Celsius above pre-industrial era. The ideal is 1.5 degree Celsius.

To make this happen, there should be radical emission reductions each year, reaching “net zero” by 2050. Emission reductions should reach at least half by 2030.

But why are the climate activists questioning the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and government financial bodies/agencies on their supposedly weak and wavering stand in the battle against global warming when these institutions have all come out – publicly – in support of the Paris Agreement and the fight against global warming? In the case of the ADB, it has even become a major producer of materials on the threats and pitfalls facing humanity due to global warming. It has produced lengthy studies on the debilitating impact of climate change on Asia’s industry, agriculture, habitat, health and population.

So where is the disconnect? First, the larger picture. De-carbonizing the world to meet the Paris Agreement requires large-scale changes in the way economies are run. The biggest emitter of GHG gases happens to be the power sector that is dependent on fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas. Hence, the sustained campaign and pressure of climate activists and climate scientists for the world to shift to the wider and fuller usage of cleaner energy alternatives such as wind, solar, hydro, etc.

The long-running campaign of the climate activists and climate scientists (over four decades already) for an “energy transition” has been bearing fruits in the increasing number of renewable energy users and developers worldwide, the development of new technologies for clean energy, the

declining prices of renewables versus the fossil fuels, and the declarations by more and more governments that they are explicitly going renewable and are getting out of coal and oil. The latest development was the joint declaration early this year by the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Investment Bank (EIB) that Europe is now exiting from fossil fuels and are no longer investing even on natural gas, a fossil fuel considered a “transition fuel” that has been found to be deadlier than coal in contributing to the warming of the Earth.

So why can’t the ADB, which has proclaimed its support for renewables and the Paris Agreement, follow the example of EIB? One explanation is history. The ADB, a regional development bank that has been the primary partner of Asian governments in the construction of energy and other infrastructure projects in more than five decades. In the energy sector, most of the investments have gone to the construction of power plants using fossil fuels. Along with the World Bank, the ADB is also Asia’s leading financier in the construction of big dams, which a number of CSOs have been denouncing as anti-people and environmentally-degrading because whole communities are uprooted and forests decimated.

Now in the construction of the power and infrastructure projects, the partners of the ADB are not only governments but also the private sector, which is usually assigned the task of designing, erecting and operating the power projects as well as in raising supplementary funds. This policy of working closely with the private sector, composed mostly of multinational corporations from the advanced economies and their corporate partners in the different Asian countries, is very much part of the neo-liberal development framework being pushed by the ADB and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. To grow a developing economy, neo-liberal economists want the borrowing country to open the doors to the free flow of goods and free flow of capital under the general programs of trade and investment liberal-

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Making the “Green New Deal” Work for the Working People of Asia

ization and privatization.

The ADB and the IMF, through the International Finance Corporation (IFC), are the original promoters of privatization in power and infrastructure development in Asia. The ADB christened the privatization program in the 1970s as “co-financing”. Today, privatization, as the panacea for the economic problems facing Asia, has become the standard policy recommendation given by ADB, IMF and the World Bank to the borrowing Member Countries of Asia.

This explains then why the public or government-run power sector in some countries has been subjected to privatization on the advice and pressure of the ADB. This happened in the Philippines in 2000-2001, when the ADB assisted the Philippine government in providing the rationale, design and mechanisms for the wholesale privatization of the power sector, meaning the privatization of power generation, transmission and distribution, including the establishment of a so-called “spot market” for corporations engaged in the buying and selling of power. The justification advanced for the wholesale privatization of the Philippine power sector was seductively simple: cheaper electricity for the Filipino consumers. And yet today, two decades after, the Philippines has acquired the notorious title of having the most expensive electricity in Southeast Asia and one of the most expensive as well in the world.

So the dilemma for ADB is how can it persuade, if it so decides, its development partners in the power sector of Asia – investment financiers from Japan and other countries and corporate power builders and operators in the different Asian countries – to get out of coal and other fossil fuels and to go renewable instead? How to push these big investors to get out of coal or oil or gas when these investors are already raking in so much profits from their investments? As it is, the ADB partnership with its private power financiers and developers has spawned a chain of GHG-emit-

ting power plants across Asia, with some just built in the last ten years. Is this the reason why per report of CSO energy tracker for Asia (Koons, 2021), ADB refused to sign a statement for the “Finance in Common” summit committing the signatories to reduce fossil fuel investments? Ironically, the energy tracker also reported that ADB has been investing actively on renewable projects. Is this part of the ADB’s two-sided policy on energy, one side renewable and another GHG emitting?

In the case of the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), President Jin Lique explained in Washington meeting in July 2020 that China’s intention is to make the AIIB, a critical component of the ambitious Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) of China, a “green bank” (Saldinger and Ravelo, 2020). And yet, in an energy investment tracking done by the NGO Forum on ADB (Recourse, 2020), it was found that for every \$1 the AIIB has invested since 2016 (founding year of AIIB), it has invested more than twice on fossil fuels.

It is abundantly clear that both the ADB and AIIB cannot walk the talk on going green or going renewable. And yet, their rhetoric indicates that the two banks have embraced greening – publicly -- as a commitment to the Paris Agreement. To the NGO Forum on ADB, this is all part of the “green washing” that the two banks are making. Similarly, Asian governments are also engaged in doublespeak – yes to the collective fight against global warming, and yet, extreme reluctance in even submitting realistic, measurable and time-bound commitments to the Paris Agreement under their respective nationally-determined contributions (NDCs).

Obviously, the ADB, AIIB, Asian governments and other financial institutions can only give their full commitment and mobilize resources in the all-out fight against global warming if – and only if -- there is a determined pressure from the organized working people of Asia.



Photo by Yusron B. Jihan

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