



Policy Forum Guyana

IS OIL & GAS SIDE-LINING GUYANA'S CLIMATE COMMITMENTS?

In November 2015, related civic, business and Government participants approved the “*Intended Nationally-Determined Contributions* (INDCs), Guyana’s progressive climate change agenda, launched from a REDD+ foundation and culminating in ratification of the Climate Convention, placing Guyana at the forefront of climate crisis action.

Four years on, however, with oil production projected at 700,000 barrels per day by 2025, Guyana’s carbon per capita footprint will rise steeply from its current 4.2 tons per capita to reach 108 tons per capita. In addition, approximately 31,000 acres of forest in Guyana have been destroyed annually for many years by mining and mining-related activities. This has resulted in eliminating the carbon storage capacity of between 150 and 400 million tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per acre which tropical forests can absorb. Combining forest destruction with oil production relegates Guyanese from stewards to squanderers of natural resources - the worst kind of climate deniers.

How did the elation evaporate and why was the ambition abandoned? In the intervening years, Guyanese society has been fed a diet of green project rhetoric, while the same old approach in the extractive sector – save in forestry - has not just continued, but has accelerated. The closer the prospect of elections loom, the further official public discourse retreats from rigorous and measurable climate commitments. You can’t suck cane and whistle. Moreover, while the Coalition Government must accept primary responsibility for abandoning climate goals, they are not being challenged on this front by other electoral contenders.

Guiding principles are significantly absent from policy papers or statements issued by various Government Agencies on climate change issues and resource patrimony. In particular, there is little to no reference to inter-generational equity and recognition that mineral resources are inherited assets of all Guyanese (our family valuables, they are not about someone winning the lottery). The notion that they belong as much to the next generations as the present one requires rigorous attention be paid to who benefits, who is responsible for the disposal of these assets, and what is the true and full accounting cost (environmental damage etc.) of the extraction of these resources. Urgently needed as well is a serious national discussion about what is to be left alone/held in reserve in the face of oil, the newest extractive industry.

According to the recent Guyana Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative(GYEITI) Report, for example, the biggest private miners in Guyana individually control licenses for lands larger than Guysuco's 102,677 acres or 165 square miles of land, about the same size as Barbados at 166 square miles. They head a lengthy list of others holding equally mind-boggling extensions. They then 'landlord' out licensed land to small miners who by and large are exposed to the greatest financial and occupational risk. As a result Guyana's mining policy – which benefits a handful of very rich people - is in direct opposition to Guyana's commitment to biodiversity, conservation, forest stewardship, land use, and notions of a good life for all.

Furthermore, excessive concentration of extractive assets in the hands of a few private individuals makes nonsense of the *principle of equity*. The only justification for selling our national patrimony (the assets of the country) is that they are replaced by assets of equal value for the benefit of future generations. Private destruction of publicly-owned assets such as minerals, land, rivers and the bio-sphere only attracts sporadic indignation from a population stressed by more day-to-day matters of survival.

Positioning natural gas as a progressive 'bridge' towards alternative energy is another misleading notion. The assertion that natural gas is cleaner than the Bunker 'C' fuels currently in use and that it would sharply reduce CO2 generation, is another example of not doing a full cost accounting. Natural gas is dirty and dangerous. Guyana is well placed to by-pass interim measures and aim directly at fossil-free energy by the NDC goal of 2025.

To date, discussion of oil and gas issues have been limited to technical and financial matters while civic engagement with the issues has been random. No consensus has been sought over whether we actually want oil and gas to be the determinant of Guyana's future. A full national discussion, both inside and outside of Parliament, not restricted only to experts, is essential. These fundamental decisions are not for an electoral time-table. They are forever.

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