

The Winners are... the IPCC and Al Gore

[by Unai Pascual]

Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Willy Brandt, René Cassin, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Yasser Arafat. All of them have something in common. They were all awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. On the 12th of October 2007, this year's Nobel Peace Prize was announced. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) under the leadership of its chair, Rajendra Pachuri and Al Gore, the ex vice-president of the US during the Clinton administration, were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change". The Norwegian Nobel Committee took the decision to acknowledge the "increased danger of violent conflicts and wars, within and between states" posed by climate change.

This is another interesting moment to reflect about global environmental sustainability and address its connections with human wellbeing by nurturing peace. It is also an interesting time to look back at the continued work that ecological economics has done in linking environmental sustainability and human wellbeing, or put it differently, between environmental conflicts and social conflicts, sadly many times translated into violent conflicts for the control of strategic natural resources around the world. In addition, it is remarkable that the international political momentum provided by the decision of the prestigious Norwegian Nobel Committee reflects that global environmental sustainability issues should be treated "with the precautionary principle uppermost in our minds". As we know, Europe has led the precautionary principle approach in Environmental Policy and thus it is no coincidence that the Nordics are pushing it forward and delivering the message of its appropriateness to the World through this Prize.

But something else is in the making in Oslo too. It is the second time since the Prize was set up in 1901 that it is directly associated with environmental concerns. In 2004, Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the award, received the prize for helping Africa's poor by organising the planting of millions of trees, acknowledging that environmentally healthy societies are less prone to social conflicts. The Nobel Committee has expanded the peace concept to include environmental issues; the 2004 committee chairman Ole Danbolt Mjoes pointed out that "a good quality of life on Earth is necessary to promote lasting peace in the world". Perhaps this move is also consistent with the 2005 Prize given to Mohamed ElBaradei as the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency by claiming that the Prize rewarded the "IAEA's efforts to prevent nuclear energy from being used for military purposes and to ensure that nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is used in the safest possible way". As we are seeing, environmental concerns have been raised to the top of the Nobel Peace Prize agenda. While this may sound good, it also reflects that the state of the world affairs with respect to how we treat natural resources and the environment at large is largely deficient. The Nobel Committee is just politically acknowledging that more needs to be done.

It is also clear that in this era of rapid economic, social and environmental change, driven by the globalization thrust, the complex concepts of global environmental sustainability, security and peace, addressed in the political arena, are closely intertwined. This also implies that it is likely that any interpretation regarding the recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize is also subject to the international political prism of the moment. Of course, this would not cause surprise within the European Ecological Economics Society, as it is used to enquiry about the connections and evolutionary nature of the linkages between environmental, economic and political institutions. Having said this, it is reasonable to ask why the IPCC and Al Gore and why now? Why not for example the Chipko movement or countless other grassroot

organizations and activists which we may think of and who would also meet the condition of demonstrating their continued efforts “to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about” not just climate change, but global environmental sustainability? Let’s go through some key aspects of the two new Nobel laureates.

The IPCC was established in 1988 by UNEP and the World Meteorological Organisation of the UN. It is comprised by more than 2,000 scientists and policy experts with the mandate to assess any scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant for the understanding of climate change. While the IPCC does not carry out research, nor does it monitor climate or related phenomena, its key role is to put together special reports on topics relevant to the implementation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The scientific information that has been systematically gathered by the IPCC for the last two decades has helped enormously to understand the potential impacts and options for adaptation and mitigation to climate change. The IPCC has also simulated potential scenarios not in some far away future but in the life-time of people reading and hearing the announcement of the Peace Prize Committee. Such scenarios range from the melting off glaciers in the Alps and the Himalayas and to more frequent and devastating floods in Europe and Asia. The Nobel Prize will no doubt, increase the media’s interest and thus the publicity of the just baked IPCC’s Fourth Assessment report known as ‘Climate Change 2007’, also referred to as AR4. The AR4 report includes new thoroughly updated assessment about (i) the physical science basis of climate change, (ii) impacts, adaptation and vulnerability, and (iii) mitigation strategies.

The Nobel Peace Prize acknowledges the laureates’ impact to the prospects of world Peace and not necessarily to scientific groundbreaking research as it is the case in physics or chemistry. This is what is special about this year’s prize, since at the same time, it has recognised the key role played by the IPCC in validating the science about climate change. The main argument brought forward by Committee is that such validation of science also has a strong association with world peace. In this vein, the Nobel Prize is a landmark for UNEP and the UN in general, as it is effectively recognises its contribution to the understanding and resolution of violent conflicts in the World by addressing the issue of global environmental sustainability. The IPCC has calculated the price of avoiding instability, rising tensions and conflict in the world to be in the order of just 0.1 per cent of global GDP per year for the next 30 years by means of combating climate change. This marginal cost is possibly far lower than the social cost of conflict, regardless if one wishes to put a money tag on it or not. This shows how uneconomic growth is becoming and how skewed are the costs and benefits of violent conflict.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), has recently stated in response to this year’s Nobel Peace Prize award that this recognises that combating climate change is a central peace and security policy and that in doing it will contribute to the unprecedented momentum on the climate change challenge in 2007. It is clear that multilateral environmental organizations such as UNEP are going to use the momentum to put additional pressure on governments in order to continue with negotiations for a decisive, post 2012 emissions reduction agreement, especially when governments gather in December in Bali for the UN climate convention meeting.

It is reasonable to think that ecological economists should be celebrating the recognition to the IPCC’s work during the last two decades, specially by helping make evident the connection between environmental sustainability and humans. So far so good. Another possible question is whether ecological economists also feel comfortable with the Former US vice-president, Al Gore, being awarded the same prize for “probably being the single individual who has done most to create greater worldwide understanding of the measures that need to be adopted” in the face of climate change. Gore is known for his environmentalism since his famous participation in the Earth Summit Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the publication

of his book "Earth in the Balance". But his environmentalist label has mostly come from his box-office hit and Oscar winning 2006 documentary film, "An Inconvenient Truth", which has been both praised and criticised since its release. For instance, a British judge in the same week of the Nobel Prize being awarded, criticised the film for containing nine factual errors and for being 'alarmist'.

While the Norwegian Nobel Committee states that "Al Gore has for a long time been one of the world's leading environmentalist politicians", Mr. Gore's declared pacifism has been put into question by many peace and environmental activists around the world. As for being a pacifist, the main critics hit a painful memory. Gore's former vice-presidency during the Clinton administration occurred while the same administration besides rejecting the authority of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, also pushed for military action in countries such as ex-Yugoslavia, Albania, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Zaire and Liberia. Such military actions, besides feeding a human drama, also proved massively destructive due to the weapons that were used, which included impoverished uranium, notorious for producing irreversible ecological, sanitary-and-hygienic and medico-biologic effects on humans and the surrounding environment.

Critical environmental voices also point out that the honourable Norwegian Nobel Committee should have considered that the new eco-celebrity was in charge of the domestic and international environmental issues in the United States between 1993 and 2000. Among others his vice-presidency's role as environmental leader failed to combat the Senate in July 1997 when it passed the Byrd-Hagel resolution by 95-0 against signing the Kyoto Protocol, thus boycotting the only one international environmental agreement to combat climate change. Another 'inconvenient fact' is that Gore is an adamant defender of a global use of biofuels to reduce atmospheric pollution at a moment when there are increased scientific doubts about its energy and food safety implications, specially in poor rural regions of developing countries. For instance, we can remember last year's *tortilla crisis* in Mexico as an example with clear roots in the renewed interest by US agribusiness on appropriating a large share of the North American maize output for promoting the biofuel industry. In addition to the hardships created for the Mexican poor, the biofuel thirst by the US energy corporations have also pushed the agricultural frontier further in Latin American countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia, as well as in Asian countries such as Indonesia. There oil palm plantations are continuing to wipe out tropical forests to feed our eco-cars while at the same time accelerating the delicate balance of carbon sequestration in forest ecosystems. Last but not least, other critics have pinpointed the ecological conscience of Al Gore given that his administration was responsible for designing and backing the ecologically disastrous Plan Colombia and its massive fumigations since the 2000 creating huge negative ecological impacts in rural Colombia where indigenous people and peasants' still need to eke out their livelihoods from what is now sterile and contaminated land.

This month's hot topic can be summarised by the (in)famously sceptical Bjorn Lomborg's opinion that while awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the IPCC may be well-founded, awarding it to Al Gore cannot be seen as anything other than a political statement. Since political vagaries are often short lived, one would still need to take refuge in thinking that the European and more generally the International Society of Ecological Economics has done tremendous work in advancing the social-science behind climate change and that it has supported the IPCC's work through their individual members during these years. While this is something to celebrate, one is left with the doubtful thought of whether has anyone been so effective in using some power point presentations and a commercial DVD to create so much interest in global environmental sustainability? It may be an 'inconvenient truth' that some eco-celebrities, through their political power links can help or may hinder the advance of ecological conscience by the political elite who could in the last instance readdress the actual trends towards climate change and thus further violent conflicts in the world.