

## UN: CAUTION, NOT CLIMATE TINKERING<sup>1</sup>

Jeff Conant<sup>©</sup>

How will we address the multiple crises of climate, biodiversity, food, and water? There are two profoundly different schools of thought. One is based on the belief that we should reduce resource exploitation and more fairly distribute resources. The other favors market-based approaches in conjunction with high-dollar technological fixes—such as the deliberate manipulation of the Earth’s climate through geo-engineering (proposed examples include seeding clouds with chemicals, obstructing solar rays with space-based mirrors, or using vertical ocean pipes to bring cooler deep-ocean water to the surface).

At last week’s meeting of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Nagoya, Japan, those who favor the first approach scored a major victory. In a landmark consensus decision, the 193-member CBD closed its tenth biennial meeting in with a *de facto* moratorium on geo-engineering projects and experiments. “Any private or public experimentation or adventurism intended to manipulate the planetary thermostat will be in violation of this carefully crafted U.N. consensus,” said Silvia Ribeiro, Latin American Director of ETC Group, who was in Nagoya lobbying for the moratorium. “This is a victory for common sense, and for precaution. It will not inhibit legitimate scientific research.”

The ETC Group—the same civil society organization that successfully pushed for an international ban on Monsanto’s infamous “terminator seed” a decade ago—led the charge for the moratorium. The group’s new report, *Geopiracy: The Case Against Geo-engineering*, offers a critique of this emerging set of planetary-scale technologies, which the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change defines as “the deliberate large-scale manipulation of the planetary environment.” David Keith, a leading proponent, gives the definition a touch more dimension: “Climatic geoengineering aims to mitigate the effect of fossil fuel combustion on the climate without abating fossil fuel use; for example, by placing shields in space to reduce the sunlight incident on earth.”

Last week’s agreement means that signatories to the U.N. Biodiversity Convention— a group of nations that, significantly, does not include the United States—must ensure that no geo-engineering projects take place until risks to the environment as well as social, cultural, and economic impacts have been properly assessed. The unusually strong consensus decision builds on the 2008 moratorium on ocean fertilization. That agreement put the brakes on a litany of failed “experiments,” both public and private, to sequester atmospheric carbon dioxide in the oceans’ depths by spreading nutrients on the sea surface.

After the 2008 ban, attention turned to a range of futuristic proposals to block a portion of solar radiation through large-scale interventions in the atmosphere, stratosphere, and outer space that would alter global temperatures and precipitation patterns. Such experiments are backed by a cadre of high profile investors and scientists, including Bill Gates, Sir Richard Branson, and Dr. Lowell Wood, the man behind Ronald Reagan’s ill-fated Star Wars initiative. “This decision clearly places the governance of geo-engineering in the United Nations where it belongs,” ETC Group Executive Director Pat Mooney said.

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Under the agreement, no geo-engineering projects can take place until risks to the environment as well as social, cultural, and economic impacts have been properly assessed. “This is a victory for common sense, and for precaution. It will not inhibit legitimate scientific research. Decisions on geo-engineering cannot be made by small groups of scientists from a small group of countries that establish self-serving ‘voluntary guidelines’ on climate hacking. What little credibility such efforts may have had in some policy circles in the global North has been shattered by this decision.”

Without doubt, the moratorium has aroused contention and controversy (see here, here, and here.) A report by the U.S. Congressional Committee on Science and Technology, released immediately after the ban was declared, states, “As this subject becomes the focus of more serious consideration and scrutiny within the scientific and policy communities, it is important to acknowledge that climate engineering carries with it not only possible benefits, but also an enormous range of uncertainties, ethical and political concerns, and the potential for harmful environmental and economic side-effects.”

At the same time, the Congressional report recommends that “broad consideration of comprehensive and multi-disciplinary climate engineering research at the federal level begin as soon as possible in order to ensure scientific preparedness for future climate events,” and that “other topics such as synthetic biology, nanotechnology, and strategic raw materials may be of international significance, and that these topics may be appropriate for bilateral or multilateral collaboration in the future.”

Such technologies carry enormous ethical and environmental risks; large-scale disasters from Chernobyl and Three-Mile Island to the BP oil disaster and the climate crisis itself are rooted in industrial overreach and a systemic failure to take a precautionary approach to technology. Given the checkered history of technology, especially at such a scale, ETC Group recommends in their Geopiracy report that the preferred strategy is not a case-by-case attack on emerging technologies, but, ultimately, an International Convention for the Evaluation of New Technologies.

Such a Convention would involve the multilateral application of the precautionary principle with full participation of developing countries and respect for international environmental and human rights law. In ETC Group’s conception, it would also ensure the preservation and diffusion of useful, conventional, or culturally distinct technologies. The goal is not to undermine research and investment in technology as such, but to make such research safer by bringing it under international protocols and democratic governance. As ETC Group’s Diana Bronson put it, “In a nutshell, many countries are quite unwilling to give a blank check to high-emissions countries to come up with another high-risk techno-fix.”