

# GEOENGINEERING THE SKY IS NOT 'NORMAL'

December 6, 2013

by Rachel Smolker

In the wake of the climate negotiations in Warsaw, the consensus appears near universal: the international process is not going to deliver, and it is up to countries and communities to go it on their own. For some, that means taking serious and dramatic steps to reduce emissions. For others, like Bangladesh or the island nations, it means finding a way to survive the consequences of climate change with little help from the international community. For all of us, it means facing a future of weather extremes, crop failures and potential disruption of virtually everything on an unprecedented scale. For advocates of climate geoengineering, the failure of global agreement is wind in their sails: "More reasons" why drastic measures such as spewing sulphate particles into the stratosphere, or "fertilizing" the ocean with iron filings, or burning and burying billions of tons of biomass (as biochar or "bioenergy with carbon capture and storage") should be seriously considered and research should be gloriously funded.

Of course the converse argument is that if global agreement on addressing climate change cannot be achieved, how can we possibly expect any global consensus on, or governance of "technomanagement" of the atmosphere where the risks of serious negative consequences, for some people in some places, at least, are so grave?

This worries me profoundly, and apparently others as well. It is why faculty from Johns Hopkins University and American University recently launched a new, Washington DC based "Climate Geoengineering Consortium". The stated goal of the consortium, perhaps laudable, is "to generate space for perspectives from civil society actors and the wider public, to produce a heightened level of engagement around issues of justice, agency, and inclusion." Perhaps I am too skeptical, but "generating space" for a debate seems a bit vague. This new consortium recently organized a meeting, slated as a "closed door" meeting of civil society representatives. Closed meetings for civil society always make me a little nervous. Especially when the topic is planetary scale interference with the global commons — the life support systems of our planet!

I'm not sure really how I ended up on the list of invitees, but I decided to attend. The meeting was held in a stark space at Johns Hopkins, with the requisite sleek furnishings and snack plates wrapped securely in sparkling plastic. Nobody in attendance was a shade darker than a bowl of oatmeal, all were dressed in drab, illuminated by glowing computers, tablets and smartphones. Represented were staff from Johns Hopkins and American University, as well as the conservative American Enterprise Institute (Lee Lane), Bipartisan Policy Center, NASA (Mike McCracken), the renowned blogger, Joe Romm, and long time (but now retired) Friends of the Earth director, Brent Blackwelder. There were representatives from U.S. Climate Action Network, Greenpeace, Food and Water Watch and various others. Certainly more diverse than some meetings, but even I could not avoid the sensation of being sort of a token.

Strikingly absent from the event was the single organization (ETC Group) that has been for years already working to raise awareness of climate geoengineering proposals among civil society via their "Hands Off Mother Earth" campaign, and also via their dogged and successful effort to promote a defacto ban on geoengineering through the Convention on Biodiversity. No other NGO has devoted anywhere near the attention to the issue, and yet oddly they were not behind these closed doors.

As expected, the opening remarks focused on reconfirming for us a sense of desperation, as we face global warming already on track to utter catastrophe. No disagreement there. We were told that climate scientists are running scared and so they are increasingly, even if reluctantly, turning to a "Plan B" for the planet. Plan B of course, being none other than, say, dumping sulphate particles into the stratosphere, pouring iron filings into the ocean, or perhaps charring and burying vast quantities of "biomass".

After a brief review of the various technologies proposed and their potential to make things worse rather than better, one member of the audience asked: "If there is no silver lining to any of these approaches, then why are we even holding this conversation?" The organizers and most in the audience giggled, made jokes about adjourning the meeting right off the bat and heading home, and then settled in to discuss what were apparently more realistic questions, such as, "how do we get civil society more engaged in the discussion of geoengineering?" and "what form of governance would be most appropriate?"

But hang on! We are being shepherded into believing that it's too late to seriously consider dropping consideration of geoengineering altogether? We are to assume that "the train has already left the station" and we now are obliged to engage in serious discussions about such outrageous proposals — or else just quietly disengage and accept the consequences.

Whose ideas are these anyway? Why are we being railroaded into accepting them as feasible and perhaps even desirable

options? Are we somehow required to entertain and engage every nutty technofix idea that someone happens to dream up? If so, there are plenty out there and we could keep busy for all eternity if that is the case, meanwhile diverting our attention from implementing the straightforward, proven, low tech, low risk approaches to saving the planet. (Like halting deforestation, protecting biodiversity, putting a halt to overconsumption, ending the mining, fracking, clear cutting and burning of the planet, and providing real support to those coping with impacts of climate change, for example.)

This insistence that we engage in debate over climate geoengineering is part of the process of “normalization” that seems orchestrated — perhaps deliberately — with the intent of habituating people to the whole idea of climate geoengineering as an option.

It does in fact seem that we have commenced an out-of-control and ill-considered flight down the slippery slope, with a near dizzying onslaught of events, meetings, reports and debates on the topic where the more fundamental question is avoided and we are invited graciously to step right up and... go get lost in the weeds.

In a recent interview, **Vandana Shiva**, when asked her opinion on one proposed approach to climate geoengineering—spraying nanoparticles into the stratosphere, responded: “Each of these issues [geoengineering technologies] has a particular aspect that’s different but I think those particular aspects are very small compared to the overall damage and the overall irresponsibility. For me the first issue is, how dare you do this. How dare you. That has to be humanity’s response. Then the rest of the little things of how nano particles can harm or having too much sulphur in the atmosphere can harm — those are specific details but this is a civilizational issue. And in civilizational issues you don’t look at the tiny details as the debate. You have to look at the big picture!”

I personally have spent quite a lot of time in the weeds, critiquing the “particular aspects” of various technologies proposed for geoengineering (see for example our Biofuelwatch reports on **biochar** and **bioenergy with carbon capture and sequestration**). But I must agree with Vandana. To a very large degree we only assist to “normalize” the issue by focusing on critique of the particular details.

What is clear is that climate geoengineering is opening new doors for many career seekers. From scientists with superman complexes, eager to be seen as doing “cutting edge” work with big important global consequence, to various environmental and other NGO careerists seeking grant support, status and a place at the table.

Moving forward, it will be necessary to keep our feet on the ground and adroitly steer clear of being led about by our collective nose on this issue. We will have to meticulously examine underlying assumptions when we sit down to discuss climate and geoengineering, and we will need to bolster immunity to the process of “normalization” because there is certainly nothing “normal” about geoengineering Earth’s climate!

*This article was originally posted to **HuffPo**.*