

From carbon offsetting to climate solidarity

Marie-Noëlle Reboulet • GERES

The story of GERES is interesting in many ways. This association of scientists, created to promote solar energy, became a development NGO and then got involved in carbon finance before joining the popular movements. We look back on a trajectory that could cross that of humanitarians.

Climate change is closely linked to the rise of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions predominantly caused by energy use and production. Historically, the main perpetrators have been the industrialised nations, but it is the world's most vulnerable countries that have borne the heaviest burden. International solidarity organisations have indeed taken climate change into account, but the fit between their ambitions and their operations in the field and in their host societies has been challenged. Now that the whole of humanity is facing this phenomenon, does solidarity still have any relevance? I will examine the concept of “climate solidarity” at GERES, an NGO specialising in energy, through its fifteen years of history.

Addressing climate change through carbon offsetting

The Group for the Environment, Renewable Energy and Solidarity (GERES) is an association that was founded in 1976 by scientists in Marseille, France, with the aim of developing solar energy at the service of the human being. In the 1980s, it grew to become a development NGO, expanding its operations to include sustainable architecture, the efficient use of biomass, and the management of energy demand, not only in its domestic region, but also in Africa and Central and Southeast Asia. Its interventions are guided by the vision of development as defined by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: “voluntary operations of transformation of the social environment, [...], and based on an attempt to transplant resources and/or techniques and/or knowledge”¹. GERES has promoted such transplanting largely by involving farmers, artisans, and small local businesses.

A project for improved cookstoves, initiated in Cambodia in 1997 with European funding, was aimed at improving the energy combustion of traditional household stoves. That same year, the Kyoto Protocol was signed. This agreement is founded on the “polluter pays principle”, and, in one of its provisions, establishes a European market for GHG emission quotas and the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)².

In 2002, the association began to seek ways to expand its improved stoves initiative. It studied the opportunity of using “carbon finance”, and the following year, committed to the voluntary offsetting of GHG emissions. Although this mechanism lies outside the scope of the CDM, it is

¹ Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Anthropologie et développement. Essai en socio-anthropologie du changement social*, Karthala, 1995, p. 7.

² Actors in developed countries can financially bear the cost of reducing emissions in developing countries.

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based on the same principles, i.e. individuals and organisations can voluntarily offset their own GHG emissions by financing the reduction of emissions elsewhere in the world. The carbon accreditation³ received over the 2003-2013 period made it possible to sell carbon credits directly from Cambodia to carbon emitters in France. CO₂Solidaire, a carbon offsetting platform, the first of its kind in France, began operating.

Over the past ten years, the distribution of New Lao Stoves (NLS) domestic cooking stoves in Cambodia has received over ten million dollars for research and development, staff training, education and support for 331 small businesses (71% of which are run by women), and even the promotion of these small appliances. Tangible results have been achieved: more than three million households have this appliance, saving 2,4 million T_{eq}CO₂⁴. Furthermore, 1,6 million tons of wood have been saved, adding 2 million dollars of local added-value to the economy annually. In addition, it saves 38 dollars of fuel per stove each year, 40% of Cambodian families now own at least one improved stove and 550 jobs have been created⁵. This first project for improved stoves that entered the carbon market has been presented with eight international awards.

Carbon: from market value to social value

However, this success story was not achieved without effort. It took five years of studies and measurements before accreditation was granted⁶, variable financing in “a hostile and complex environment ruled by the financial markets”⁷, and an internal growth to be managed. But the use of carbon finance also raises fundamental issues.

Firstly, what are the real benefits of these improved appliances? Winning the battle over climate change? Healthier people? An improved local economy? In fact, the NLS stove is not currently the most efficient means of reducing CO₂ emissions. But that is not really the issue in a country that emits less than one T_{eq}CO₂/inhabitant/year compared to the ten- to twelve-fold carbon footprint in Europe. Instead, this project is a compromise between a better environment, user acceptance and local development. Added to this is the question of who owns the carbon credits and who can therefore sell and profit from them. Legally, the answer is the project’s sponsor, but in this case, most of the sales proceeds were allocated to field operations in Cambodia. Finally, what is the “moral of the story” when French institutions or people are paying to offset their own emissions (some enhancing their image along the way), while the responsibility for actually reducing emissions lies with those who are the most impoverished in the most vulnerable countries, i.e. women in this case? These issues have prompted discussions within GERES, both on the basic principle of offsetting and on the role of NGOs in this market. The use of carbon finance for development actions has ignited a growing debate among NGOs between “saving victims [and] changing the world”⁸.

³ Following the audit by Det Norske Veritas (accredited by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, itself adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992), the project was registered by VCS (Verified Carbon Standard, the sole standard at that time with improved cooker guidelines) on the Market Registry.

⁴ Million tonnes of equivalent CO₂.

⁵ GERES, « Changer d’échelle, comment les cuiseurs améliorés se diffusent par millions », *Outcomes magazine*, 2014, <https://www.geres.eu/fr/publication/outcomes-magazine-retour-sur-10-ans-de-finance-carbone>

⁶ Accreditation received in 2007 retroactive from 2003.

⁷ P3Value, *Projets de développement accédant aux fonds carbone: modalités du partage des bénéfices et retombées socio-économiques locales*, www.geres.eu, 2014, p. 5.

⁸ Jean Freyss, « La solidarité internationale, une profession ? », *Revue Tiers Monde*, n° 180, 2004, p. 759.

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In response to these issues, GERES emphasises its specific characteristics. GERES encourages clients to reduce their emissions as a priority so that they offset just the so-called “incompressible” GHG emissions, and it points to the social value of avoided emissions (which goes beyond regulated market prices). “This means making a clear distinction between carbon credits from industrial projects and carbon credits from development programmes which [...] will improve the living conditions of the poorest”⁹. Thus, in 2006, GERES introduced the concept of “climate solidarity”, using the slogan, “reduction of CO₂ emissions in the North and supporting a climate development project in the South”.

In 2013, in the wake of the significant fraud and huge profits that some companies had reaped from the carbon markets, environmental NGOs took an active stance to have these abolished. GERES has defended the voluntary offsetting that has been used to support numerous development projects¹⁰ and give greater meaning to carbon finance¹¹. Now that these controversies have subsided, for-profit businesses have positioned themselves on this market, and social and environmental guarantees have been created at the highest levels.

Further actions against climate change

This story of massive diffusion of improved stoves through voluntary carbon offsetting has profoundly changed the association. With strong growth in business and workforce, new skills emerged. The association has committed to adapting to climate change by drawing up diagnostics of a community’s vulnerabilities, capacity building, and supporting the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) provided for under the Paris Agreement. It has launched the Cemaaterr programme¹² to support regional stakeholders and climate/energy policies in Benin, Cambodia, Morocco, and Mongolia. The association has also moved towards a more integrated approach in providing access to energy and protecting resources (in Cambodia, actions have been extended to artisan baking, sustainable forest management, and the production of coal and alternative fuels). After generating advocacy in the Conference of the Parties (COP) since 2007 and contributing to the structuring of the French associative sector (leader of the Climate and Development Commission of Coordination SUD since 2013), the association has become more open to the general public through its CO₂Solidaire platform which includes an educational dimension.

These developments have been reflected in its statutes, amended in 2008 to account for its purpose of limiting climate change and its consequences and reducing energy poverty. One of the principles of its charter (2012) states the need “to help people adapt to new situations”.

Climate Solidarity as a cause and a trademark

Driven by its carbon offsetting platform and its concept of climate solidarity¹³, GERES has always associated carbon offsetting with the idea of solidarity. The term “climate solidarity”, while initially setting the association apart from new entrants onto the market, has also raised

⁹ GERES, Annual Report 2008, p.51-52.

¹⁰ Groupe Initiatives, « La finance carbone comme moyen d'accès des plus pauvres à l'énergie », *Traverses*, n° 41, 2012.

¹¹ Pierre Ducret et Maria Scolan, « Le prix du carbone : la valeur d'une expérience », *Vraiment durable*, vol. 4, no 2, 2013, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-vraiment-durable-2013-2-page-47.htm>

¹² Climat-énergie: mesures d'adaptation et d'atténuation sur les territoires ruraux et villes secondaires relais, soutenu par l'AFD.

¹³ Trademark registered by GERES at the French National Institute of Industrial Property.

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public awareness. It expresses the idea that “developed countries’ historic responsibility for the changes means they should be involved in ongoing practical action”¹⁴. This strategy was reflected in the opening up of CO₂Solidaire to other associations in 2014 and the creation of the Info-Compensation-Carbone website in 2015.

That year, during the COP21 and at GERES’ invitation, 3,200 individuals, eight companies and forty organisations signed the “Appeal for Climate Solidarity”. Bolstered by this first citizen initiative and in the face of a worsening climate emergency, our association and several other organisations decided to take further action. In 2017, a new campaign based on the Sustainable Development Goals was launched to encourage citizens to fight climate change and support low-carbon development for vulnerable populations regardless of their country¹⁵.

Finally, in 2018, a new strategic plan was launched with one central question: how can the living conditions of the most vulnerable populations be improved, especially so that they can have access to energy without GHG concentrations reaching levels in the atmosphere that are incompatible with life, while maintaining the link between operational action and involvement, and between energy and climate? These questions forced us to return to the very idea of solidarity, this “interdependence of people linked by common interests”, a “feeling that inspires people to help each other”¹⁶. This notion, which arose in the nineteenth century, resurfaced in the 1980s when the idea of the welfare state was challenged and when many French NGOs preferred to be called International Solidarity Organisations. “Against the liberal individualism of the *laissez-faire*, we are witnessing the return of the individual by right, but a tangible individual forging bonds with his fellow men”¹⁷.

Solidarity, which is based on mutual dependency, takes on its full meaning when applied to climate change. Faced with this global challenge, the feeling that moves us to provide mutual assistance to one another (“mutual” is fundamental) must be fully activated if total chaos is not to ensue. Solidarity is the approach that will give a more tangible dimension to the issues and the actions with regards climate change.

But is solidarity enough to deal with climate inequalities, especially in its ability to help people cope with disasters and ultimately readapt? Climate is a shared resource and only commonly-agreed rules can protect it. And for us all to live comfortably on our Mother Earth, we earthlings must refrain from exerting undue pressure on our natural environment – this is the environmental threshold – and ensure that nobody is lacking in basic needs (water, energy, education, health, etc.) – this is the social threshold¹⁸. Climate justice and social justice are inseparable. They can only be attained by taking into account the common interests that bind us. The notion of solidarity has never been more relevant, but is indivisible on a planetary scale. It can not be reduced with the aid of the “north” towards the “south”. This is the principle of universality central to the Paris Climate Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2019, these discussions at GERES have finally made climate solidarity its primary focus feeding its entire intervention strategy. Climate solidarity is all about addressing the global climate issue and promoting access to decent living conditions for everyone in France and

¹⁴ GERES, Annual Report 2008, p.51.

¹⁵ <https://actions.solidariteclimatique.org>

¹⁶ *Petit Larousse*.

¹⁷ Marie-Claude Blais, *La Solidarité: histoire d'une idée*, Gallimard, 2007.

¹⁸ Kate Raworth, *La Théorie du donut. L'économie de demain en 7 principes*, Plon, 2018 (édition anglaise, 2017).

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abroad. Having entered carbon finance through the offsetting door more than fifteen years ago, this association of professionals, active in the field, energy specialist, including support for mitigation and adaptation projects and policies, decided to engage in mobilising citizens. It aims to act in the face of climate emergency and to establish the conditions required for a fair and responsible energy transition.

But climate phenomena do not refer solely to technical and financial measures, they also raise questions about the relationships between people and societies. By promoting climate solidarity, our association's ambition is to give new meaning to the idea of solidarity, to highlight shared ties and the underlying mutual dependency that brings us together. Climate solidarity is universal. The challenge now is to make this happen at all levels of our organisation and with all our partners.

Translated from the French by Alan Johnson

Biography • Marie-Noëlle Reboulet

An Agronomist (1982) and holder of a Master's degree in social sciences (EHESS, 2015), she has worked in international solidarity NGOs and in renewable energy since the 1980s. A Professor in an agricultural high school, and having worked for 15 years in research in wind energy, and as a general delegate of the POWEO Foundation (2008-2013, "for access to energy in Africa"), Marie-Noëlle has been the President of the GERES since 2017.

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