Tuesday, 25 November 2008

To Whom it Concerns,

Council fails to put its own policy into practice.

Are the new Civic Offices in Mullingar going to literally cost the Earth?

Westmeath County Council's use of tropical plywood in their Civic Offices may contravene a number of international conventions and protocols designed to protect the global environment. Two in particular of note are the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The Council (like so many other Council's around Ireland) has dodged a golden opportunity to kill two birds with one stone -both the economic downturn and global climate change. Creating new jobs in the Irish panel board industry is essential to meet the government's plans of insulating homes in the economic crisis, and is urgently needed to tackle global climate change and safeguard a clean and prosperous future for us all.

This could create exciting new business opportunities and tens of thousands of jobs - as well as slashing fuel bills and greenhouse gas emissions. Increased local authority accountability is urgently needed in creating a successful, low- carbon economy. Having and implementing a responsible timber procurement policy is a step in the right direction if we are to avoid the climate change collision course we are currently on.

Plywood samples taken from the site have been sent away for analysis. However, it is suspected that Chinese plywood containing tropical hardwood species - *bintangor* and *nyatoh* (pencil cedar) have been found in the construction of the new Civic Offices in Mullingar. Both these species are found in paradise forests of south East Asia. An issue which has been highlighted in recent years, as these species are often logged illegally. For instance the majority of bintangor comes from Papua New Guinea (PNG) where illegal and destructive logging is rampant. Logging companies in the area have been accused of widespread illegality including human rights abuses. Much of this bintangor is shipped to China where it is used in the manufacturer of cheap throw away plywood-such as that used in hoardings and cladding on numerous building sites around Ireland.

. *"Illegal-logging is causing widespread social, environmental, economic and ecological hardship for millions of people in developing countries. It is also a major contributory factor to climate change"* says Tom Roche of Just Forests. If the plywood is as suspected, Just Forests intends to take legal action against the Council. A report will be sent to the Minister for the Environment and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Tom Roche, from Just Forests, said: "By using endangered tropical hardwood in the construction of this building Westmeath County Council is trashing some of the world's last remaining rainforests. It makes a mockery of its claim 'Leading by Example' in their own Local Agenda 21 document on the issue of climate change, as forest destruction is one of the main causes of global warming. The Council needs to introduce a tough new policy on this, or it risks further scandal."

By not specifying a suitable material made right here in Ireland from locally-grown timber by a wholly-owned Irish company that provides local employment and which is independently certified to the highest international standards, they have failed to practice what they preach. In their own Local Agenda 21 Strategy document-'Leading by Example', which is available on their website, Westmeath County Council has let a golden opportunity to be a model of 'sustainable development' for other local authorities and indeed their own constituents, slip through their fingers -they have made a mockery of the spirit of 'sustainable development'.

They have failed to send a strong message to irresponsible timber traders that 'business as usual' is not acceptable. Neglecting to have a clearly defined procurement policy on timber and wood-based products means their own 'carbon footprint' will increase. This is no way for a modern-day local authority to behave in light of impending Climate Change issues and looming unemployment – the greatest challenges facing society for the foreseeable future.

At a time when we are all being asked by national and local government to 'reduce', 'reuse' and 'recycle' in order to minimise our 'carbon footprint' on the earth and conserve finite resources, Westmeath County Council has failed to show good example and lead the way in relation to national and global environmental issues. The Council's use of tropical plywood in the new Civic Offices is morally reprehensible. The plywood is made from hardwood from tropical rainforests and its use raises legal, ethical, environmental, social, biodiversity and economic issues that will have far-reaching and potentially catastrophic consequences. The construction industry is the biggest consumer of timber in the country which is why it is vital for contractors, architects and builders to source timber from environmentally and socially responsible sources such as those certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Local Authorities are in a very good position to influence change. They construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes and establish local environmental policies and regulations. They also assist in implementing national and regional environmental policies. They are very close to the people and play a vital role in educating and mobilising the public and responding to community concerns. Therefore, Local Authorities – large or small – are important players for putting sustainable development into practice. They are important consumers with public procurement policies as a powerful tool for promoting the use of environmentally and socially responsible products and practices. Local Authorities' behaviour is likely to have an important influence on people and they should take every opportunity to set a good example to the public.

Around the world, illegal logging, criminal exploitation and trade in forest resources are destroying forest ecosystems, undermining the livelihoods of local communities and depriving governments in transition of much-needed revenue. Illegal logging causes environmental damage, promotes corruption, undermines the rule of law and good governance and funds armed conflict. It retards sustainable development in some of the poorest countries of the world. Consumer countries like Ireland contribute to these problems by importing timber and wood products without ensuring that they are legally sourced through credible third-party verification.

An Environmental Audit Committee report by the UK Government was critical of the lack of control over the sources of timber bought by their own government departments. The report cited the absence of clear guidance for departments on timber procurement as contributing to the issue. It also highlighted the fact that "*60% of the tropical timber imported into the UK was illegally*

logged". Much of the tropical timber entering Ireland comes from UK importers. The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimate that the global trade in timber is worth more than 150 billion US Dollars a year, of which the EU is the world's largest importer. Estimates suggest that as much as 50 percent of EU imports of timber and wood products from Southern countries may be illegally sourced and 20 percent from Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation.

The EU has expressed its concern for the influx of illegally-sourced forest products into the European market and has issued a directive to member states to tackle the problem: the directive is contained in a document entitled 'Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade' (FLEGT). While some producer and consumer countries are paying increasing attention to illegal logging, Just Forests believe that not enough is being done here in Ireland. Irish timber traders and local authorities have an important role to play in halting this earth destroying activity - a *'business as usual'* approach is not good enough.

Reports from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that global warming will cause an increase in the extinction of animal and plant species, water shortages to spread and droughts and floods to become more frequent as man-made emissions of greenhouse gases cause the Earth to warm. At a time when we are all being asked by national and local government to 'reduce', 'reuse' and 'recycle' in order to minimise our 'carbon footprint' on the earth and conserve finite resources, local authorities across the country are failing to show good example and lead the way in relation to national and global environmental issues.

Plants and trees play a vital role in purifying our air of harmful greenhouse gases. The process is commonly referred to as carbon sequestration. This is the natural process whereby living plants and trees remove carbon from the atmosphere through photosynthesis as they grow. The earth's vegetation and soil currently contain the equivalent of almost 7,500 gigatons of CO2 - more carbon than that contained in all remaining oil stocks, and more than double the total amount of carbon currently accumulated in the atmosphere. The carbon presently locked up in forest ecosystems alone is greater than the amount of carbon in the atmosphere.

Some of this carbon is transferred to the soil through the roots and as leaves fall and decay. But when soils are disturbed through ploughing or when trees are cut down, the stored carbon oxidizes and escapes back into the atmosphere as CO2. Emissions from deforestation are very significant globally. The much lauded Stern Review –*The Economics of Climate Change*, by the UK government puts annual emissions from deforestation at more than 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions. This is greater than that produced by the whole of the global transport sector. These emissions could potentially be cut significantly fairly quickly. No new technology has to be developed, but *action is needed*. Having clear and workable environmentally-conscious public procurement policies in relation to the supply of goods and services is a very good starting point. Local authorities should lead the way.

When politicians knock on your door over the coming months and ask for your vote, ask them what they will do to support sustainable development. What will they do to support local timber producers? Ask them what actions they will take to reduce their own 'carbon footprint'. Ask them what they will do to stop the deplorable siphoning off of natural resources from poor people in developing countries. Let them know that you do not want your children to have to pay for their lack of accountability on environmental sustainability issues. It's not enough to have a

policy on a website. Policies must be put into practice and regularly monitored to ensure implementation. People are waiting around thinking things will change. Things will not change until we change and do the right thing. The future is in our hands.
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