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Published: 2009

Acting in good Faith

Alexandra de Blas

Arguments over the science and economics of climate change dominate the national debate, but the social justice and humanitarian imperatives for action are gaining weight. Alexandra de Blas reports.



Credit: World Vision

Reverend Tim Costello, CEO of World Vision Australia, the country's largest charity, is seeing the impacts of climate change exacerbate poverty and nearly every facet of his organisation's work is affected. Out in the field, monsoons are falling more frequently, land that has been farmed for 1000 years is no longer arable, and where once two crops were harvested, now there is one. The need to respond to climate-related humanitarian disasters has increased enormously.

'It's absorbing a lot of our attention and money,' Costello says. From a health perspective, he has noticed the ground shift particularly in the last five years. 'In ... Zimbabwe, Harari was built above the mosquito line, now it's got malaria; Nairobi likewise.'

As Climate Change Minister Penny Wong attended climate meetings in New York last month, Reverend Costello was taking part in the city's Climate Week to stress the point that climate change can no longer be dealt with through the lens of national self-interest. 'We need a new political paradigm in which the international community acts in the interests of the poor.'



Credit: World Vision Australia

Acting in everyone's best interests

All countries will be affected by climate change, and the interconnected challenges it presents cannot be addressed without cooperation between nations. The current circumstances truly reflect 'the tragedy of the commons', where self-interest undermines the good of the whole.



Credit: iiSD Reporting Services – Linkages

In Oceania, climate impacts are already being felt across agriculture and many poorer nations face related issues to do with rising sea levels and extremes of weather. Aside from degrading livelihoods and health, thereby increasing poverty, climate change is predicted to result in millions of people being dislocated – an issue central to current social justice arguments.

A report by Oxfam in July – 'The future is here: climate change in the Pacific' – documented ways in which Pacific Islanders are already feeling the effects of climate change and are in need of greater support. It highlighted that by 2050 approximately 150 million people may be displaced because of climate change, of which 75 million are likely to be in the Asia-Pacific region (that number will grow to around 150 million by 2100).

Unfairly, those who will be most affected by global warming have made the least contribution to it. The World Bank estimates that developing countries will bear 75 to 80 per cent of the potential associated effects. The Global Humanitarian Foundation's Human Impact Report, launched by Kofi Annan this year,¹ records that 300 000 people had died due to climate change last year and half a billion are at extreme risk.

In his recent book, *Blueprint for a Safer Planet*, prominent British economist Nicholas Stern described the climate change conference in Copenhagen in December as 'the most important international gathering since the Second World War'. He argues that if we seize the opportunity to act now we are in a position to create a cleaner, safer, more biodiverse and thriving world. Delay would be far more costly, undermining growth and future prosperity while creating conflict and other dire consequences.

For Stern, the two big issues of the century are climate change and world poverty, and the solutions to each are inextricably linked. We either succeed on both or fail on both; there is no in between, he advises.

Paying for just outcomes

For the outcome to be just, it is crucial that adequate finance is provided for mitigation and adaptation in developing countries – without it poorer nations will not sign on. Annual contributions of \$100 billion or more by 2020 are under discussion. The need for leadership on deep emission cuts is also vital.



Credit: Dave Tacon/Oxfam

The UN meeting in Bali in 2007 noted that to stabilise the world's greenhouse gas emissions at 450 parts per million of CO₂-equivalent (ppm CO₂-eq) – restricting warming to the 2°C limit considered dangerous – emissions from developed countries would need to fall by between 25 to 40 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020 and 80 to 95 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.

But the science that underpins the growing campaign for a target of 350 ppm CO₂ suggests these goals are already too weak.

Despite this, the Australian Government's emission reduction target is only 5 to 15 per cent by 2020 with a promise of 25 per cent if a more ambitious global agreement is reached. Considering the urgency, is this a fair and just position for the world's highest per capita emitter to take?

According to Erwin Jackson, Research and Policy Director with The Climate Institute, the weak international targets on

the table in the current negotiations would result in a world that was 3 to 4 degrees warmer. ‘This would far exceed the ability of many economies to adapt and would lead to widespread suffering right across the planet. And, it’s a long way against Australia’s national interest.’

But how far the industrialised countries shift before December depends on how much the United States is prepared to strengthen its commitment to cutting emissions. And that in turn relies on China, India, Brazil and South Africa being able to demonstrate that they are prepared to take action to limit their growing pollution.

The new deal will be much more complex than the Kyoto Protocol. Coming away from Copenhagen with ‘a decision to finalise a legally binding agreement’, stresses Jackson, is fundamental to an outcome.

He also believes the treaty will need flexibility to allow the target to drop to 350 ppm CO₂ or lower once the next IPCC report has assessed the science in four years time.

Should the richest help the most?

Dr Jeremy Moss, Director of the Social Justice Initiative at The University of Melbourne, has an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship to develop a new framework for how to distribute the costs of responding to climate change fairly.



Credit: iiSD Reporting Services – Linkages

‘It is the problem of the poor rich and the rich poor’, says Moss, explaining how to ensure the cost burden doesn’t fall unfairly upon the wrong people. ‘While industrialised countries may pay for mitigation in developing nations it is unfair for the poor in rich countries to foot a disproportionate amount of the bill. We also don’t want a situation where the rich in developing countries get away with paying very little. China has 400 000 millionaires and is the world’s largest emitter; the wealthy in countries like China and India also need to contribute’, he says.

There are two dimensions to the social justice issue concerning climate change: first, how to put in place a strategy to stop or adapt to its harmful effects, and second, to find a just solution for the people who pay for it.

In terms of the moral debate, there are real questions to weigh up. Does responsibility for payment lie with those who are polluting now or those who have polluted historically? Moss would argue that in the current emergency the most effective course of action will be for the countries who can afford to pay, to pay.

‘We are currently seeing a great deal of self-interest rather than collective interest being demonstrated by countries, businesses and governments’, Moss adds. ‘There’s a lot of special interest pleading going on ... which needs to be overcome.’

The Copenhagen Communiqué signed by over 500 companies bucks this trend. Released in New York on 22 September during Climate Week, it calls for world leaders to agree on ‘an ambitious, robust and equitable global deal on climate change that responds credibly to the scale and urgency of the crisis facing the world today’.

Environmental Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and aid organisations are now taking up the baton of climate change in earnest from a social justice and humanitarian perspective. But for almost a decade in Australia, Friends of the Earth (FOE) was the sole organisation calling for the recognition of environmental refugees.

Cam Walker from FOE's Melbourne office points out that until around 2006, environmental displacement slipped between the cracks as neither a human rights nor an environmental issue. 'Thankfully', he says, 'that situation is changing. Key ministers within the federal government are increasingly making statements about people affected by climate change in the Pacific and aid organisations and NGOs are directing attention towards the problem.'

However, both Oxfam and The Australia Institute have flagged that Australia and New Zealand have been relatively unwilling to even discuss the migration of islanders who are forced to relocate due to climate impacts.

Aid and environmental groups have welcomed the government's commitment of AU\$150 million to adaptation over three years in the 2008–09 budget. Initial investments made under the International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative focused on science and research, but in August AU\$25 million was allocated to help implement high priority, practical adaptation programs in Pacific Island countries.

Oxfam's 'The future is here' report calls for the federal government to double its annual commitment to AU\$300 million to help further address the urgent on-ground adaptation needs in the region.

Religion is a fundamental strand

The number and variety of faith groups adopting a social justice position on sustainability and climate change are also expanding. In November last year the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC) was established in Sydney. A multi-faith network committed to taking action, it has established a green power program, organised for letters from religious leaders to be sent to the Prime Minister and is establishing the practice of a meat-free day. Miriam Pepper, from the Uniting Church, is its secretary.



Credit: World Vision

'At the ecumenical level the World Council of Churches and the Pacific Conference of Churches in our region have been active for some time', says Pepper. 'They are starting to make strong statements about climate change and the social justice implications of environmental sustainability, and this is now starting to manifest as a growing awareness.'

Activity is increasing in the lead up to Copenhagen with Pope Benedict XVI and the Dalai Lama making statements in recent months. The Dalai Lama was the first signatory of a Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change which supports NASA scientist Dr James Hansen's call for a target of 350 ppm of CO₂ in the atmosphere.

The Parliament of World Religions will hold its five-yearly meeting in Melbourne in December, making a live cross into the UN COP15 climate meeting in Copenhagen. Its theme is 'Make a world of difference, hearing each other, healing the Earth'.

Keynote speaker Tim Costello emphasises that the world is profoundly religious. Most developing countries and

industrialised nations like the US have a spiritual dimension. Costello believes that, 'There can be no binding solutions on climate change without religious dimensions to lock them in.' Appealing to the solutions within the strands of the scriptures, whether they be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Christian or Buddhist, is 'profoundly important to move us to sustainable protocols on climate change.'

Associated with the Parliament there will be a three-day multi-faith journey to the Murray River entitled 'Walking humbly', which will engage with different communities affected by the Black Saturday bushfires and drought in Victoria's Murray-Darling Basin.

'The most important thing about theology,' says ABC religious broadcaster, John Cleary, 'is that what you believe in drives your life. If the churches to which these people belong believe that environmental stewardship is foundational theology, then they'll begin to take that as a religious imperative. That then makes them a pressure group to be seriously reckoned with.'

Religious commentator and author Dr Paul Collins has completed his second book on the environment and theology, which examines climate change, amongst other things. Given the dire straits we're in, he advocates that we bring everything that is worthwhile within our culture to bear on the environmental issues we face. The Catholic Church educates 22 per cent of all children in Australian schools, and he says, 'We need to bring together all our resources and focus, so that people begin to see that morally and ethically the environment is an issue that is absolutely pivotal and central to our future.'

A now familiar prediction is that if greenhouse gas concentrations increase to 550 ppm CO₂-eq and temperatures rise more than 2 degrees above pre-Industrial levels, Australians will see the end of the Great Barrier Reef, the complete demise of the Murray-Darling system and large extinction scenarios across the country. Collins warns that, 'Those many things that reflect the splendour of God will just go extinct' and the consequences for human well-being will be far-reaching.

If we lose 'this wonderfully rich world ... we won't have wilderness to contemplate that which nurtures our imagination and helps us be human – let alone to be spiritual, cultural and creative.'

It appears that the time has come for ethical and social justice considerations – whether they be faith based or secular in origin – to play a greater role in resolving the climate crisis. At heart, there is an undeniable moral call to be answered. Meanwhile, the future of human civilisation and the natural world as we know it hang in the balance.

¹ The Human Impact Report is the first consolidated report specifically and exclusively focused on the adverse impacts of climate change on human society across the world. Global Humanitarian Foundation (2009) 'The anatomy of a silent crisis'. Human Impact Report – Climate Change.

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