

May 2006

The climate of poverty: Facts, fears and hope

182 million people in sub-Saharan Africa alone could die of disease attributable to climate change by the end of the century. Many millions more throughout the world face death and devastation due to climate-induced floods, famine, drought and conflict.

'As the water level dropped, I foresaw conflict,' said Wako Liba, a herdsman and community leader from a remote village called Sambarwawa in northern Kenya. Because of drought, more than 10,000 herders with 200,000 cattle had descended on the village's dry river bed, into which boreholes are driven to raise water.

In December 2005, Liba's predictions came tragically true. As the drought intensified, the pressure on the water led to killings. Liba remembers one night in particular. 'Gunshots reverberated the whole night,' he said. 'By the time I came down, seven people had died.'

While it is impossible to say that Kenya's drought is directly related to global warming, or that Sambarwara's deaths are as a result of a climate change conflict, tension over dwindling natural resources is likely to become more common if the current scientific projections for climate change are at all accurate.

Climate change and poverty

The climate of poverty: facts, fear and hope, Christian Aid's new report, definitively links global warming and poor people's lives and livelihoods. Using current data on climate change-related deaths and projections for increases in temperature, the report predicts that by 2100, 182 million people in sub-Saharan Africa alone could die of drought, floods disease and hunger as a result of climate change.

Ironically, the very people who will suffer first and be hit hardest by climate change – poor people in the developing world – have contributed the least to the problem. Greenhouse gases have built up over the past century, leading to the global warming that scientists are now agreed is taking place. Authoritative sources, such as the UN's Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change are, if anything, now more alarmed than ever and are revising up their predictions.

The report also illustrates the likely economic cost of sub-Saharan African countries building reliance on oil to fuel their development. It reveals that in order to achieve the economic growth the United Nations suggests is needed to reach the Millennium Development Goals (7.1 per cent per annum between now and 2015), if oil prices continue to increase, African countries may need to spend as much as 10.6 per cent of their wealth on oil (compared with 3.3 per cent in 2004).

Source of the problem

The vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions have come from rich countries and rich countries are still the biggest emitters. In Ireland, each person is responsible for more than 17 tonnes of carbon each year and in the US the figure is 24 tonnes. By contrast, in sub-Saharan African countries, per capita annual carbon emissions are less than one tonne.

Climate change, then, is not just an important poverty issue; it is a justice issue too. As poor countries grow and develop, they will need to emit more carbon and other greenhouse gases. Yet the world's 'quota' – that amount which the atmosphere can tolerate – has already been filled and then some by already industrialised nations. We must therefore cut our emissions not only to spare poor people the worst effects of the changing climate but also to allow them to use the atmosphere more themselves.

Hope for the future

But Christian Aid's is not a counsel of despair. We not only believe action can be taken to abate climate change but that there may be opportunities in that action for poor communities. Our research into the efficacy of renewable energy in poor, rural communities not currently connected to a national grid indicates that it can transform people's lives, allowing adults to study after dark and business people to mechanise and produce more efficiently. It may also, in time, offer African and other developing nations an opportunity to grow through using clean technologies.

Taking Action:

1. Cutting Irish carbon emissions

Ireland is set to overshoot the target for reducing carbon emissions by 7 million tonnes a year from 2008. This is extremely disappointing.

In view of these shortcomings, the Irish government must now:

- Set an annual 'carbon budget' to limit the amount of greenhouse gas they can produce each year. This budget should then contract by three per cent year-on-year in order to reduce emissions by more than 60 per cent by 2050.
- Offer incentives and penalties in sectors where the most emissions can be cut. The transport and energy industries are the two most significant and demand the government's most urgent attention. Steps should also be taken to curb the rapidly rising emissions resulting from the growth in aviation.
- Establish an independent-audit commission in Ireland to check that emissions are being reduced in line with the carbon budget and recommend how to ensure they stay within this limit.

2. Helping poor countries adapt

In recognition of the fact that most poor countries continue to pollute less than those in the industrialised world and have contributed little to global warming, Ireland should lead the way in championing support for countries feeling the impact of climate change:

- The Irish government should give additional funds as effective compensation to help vulnerable poor people withstand already inevitable climate change.

3. Championing sustainable development

The Irish government must champion a development revolution – in particular through the upcoming Irish Aid White paper – setting sustainability at the heart of Ireland's international development policy.

- The proposed Irish Aid Environment Policy for Sustainable Development must produce a clear working definition of sustainable development.
- Irish Aid should support a thorough review of donor support (through the World Bank and other IFIs) for coal, oil and gas extraction, with a view to phasing it out and should commission major new research examining the power needs of poor communities

For further information please contact Niamh Garvey on 01 6110801 or ngarvey@christian-aid.org