



An article from  
**Catholic Rural Life Magazine**  
Fall 2002 volume 45 number 1

## **POVERTY, THE NEGLECTED DIMENSION OF GLOBAL CLIMATE**

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### **Introduction**

While drought and extreme heat grip parts of our nation, this might be a good time to think about the impacts of global climate change, even if there may be no direct causal links. Usually, science and economics dominate the climate debate. Science needs to determine more accurately the relationship between natural and human induced climate change. The uncertainty over the rapidity of climate change, its severity and possible impacts fosters acrimonious charges and counter charges. Various economic forces compete over what, if any, economic changes are needed, when, at what cost and to whom. These debates precipitate their own political storms. Despite all the rhetoric, an under-examined aspect of global climate change is its impacts on poor people and developing nations. As is often the case, the poor will bear a disproportionate burden from the impacts of climate change.

Pope John Paul II stated it well when he said, "We face a fundamental question which can be described as both ethical and ecological. How can accelerated development be prevented from turning against man? How can one prevent disasters that destroy the environment and threaten all forms of life, and how can the negative consequences that have already occurred be remedied?"<sup>i</sup> Too often, eradicating poverty and protecting the environment are seen as competing goals. This competition can stymie serious efforts to address either. The political battles become excuses not to take action. However, it is becoming more evident poverty and climate change must be addressed together. Morally, we have an obligation to address both.

### **The Links of Climate to Poverty**

Despite scientific uncertainties, there are two realities that confront us. First, if global temperatures continue to rise as expected, this will affect the world's water and precipitation patterns; and second, any adverse impacts will fall hardest on the poor, who have the least resources to cope.

In developing countries, many of the poor live near coastlines, depend on marginal agricultural land, or already live in dire economic and social conditions. Climate change could make matters worse. While impacts will vary and some communities will fare better than others, those poor who depend on dry land farming and non-irrigated agriculture are in a very difficult situation. On these lands, even small temperature changes could jeopardize their food security. Changes in precipitation patterns also alter water availability and quality. This will make matters worse in water deficient areas. Also, about half of the world's population lives within 50 miles of the sea. Anticipated sea level rise could displace millions in vulnerable low-lying deltas along the Ganges River, Nile Delta, Pacific Islands and other places.<sup>ii</sup>

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), agriculture is responsible for an estimated one third of global warming. The sources are primarily deforestation and biomass. Many of the poor depend on agriculture for life and livelihood. The FAO estimates that some 65% of the developing world's labor force is employed in agriculture.<sup>iii</sup> Changes in temperatures that effect water patterns such as droughts, hurricanes and floods could directly increase the vulnerability of agriculture, food security and employment for many of the poor in the developing world.

The poor also could face health problems. Public health can be vulnerable to variations in climate induced extremes (droughts, floods, extreme heat or cold). These weather related events are not new. Past history demonstrates people can adapt over time. What is new is the expected increase in the frequency and severity of these weather related events, if climate change predictions hold. Since the poor have fewer resources, they are less likely to be able to adapt well in a timely fashion. We know that good public health depends on adequate safe drinking water, sufficient food, secure shelter and stable societies. These resources will be stretched to the limits by more frequent and intense climate and weather extremes.

While science needs to do more research, we already know that natural disasters disproportionately hurt the poor. Of approximately 80,000 deaths each year from natural disasters, 95% are in poor countries. In 1998, in Central America, where Catholic Relief Services has worked for years with the poor on various development projects, hurricane Mitch caused 7,500 deaths, thousands were evacuated, and significant harm was done to the economy and social infrastructure of the region. In Honduras alone 75% were left without clean water and its economy was devastated. While there are many causes including politics, too many of the poor in Africa already face death from drought and famine already.<sup>iv</sup> More frequent or intense weather related events can disrupt or contaminate water supplies and damage sewage systems causing disease. Food production can be compromised by climate induced pests. The spread of vector species (e.g., mosquitoes) to new geographic areas could infect new populations. These events can delay or wipe out any gains from the hard efforts to help poorer countries develop.

### **Political Challenge**

Climate change also poses political challenges in achieving equity for the poor. In 1992, when the Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed, a key principle governing the agreement was "*common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.*" The United States ratified this treaty. This principle is based on realism. It recognizes that the richer and poorer countries have different responsibilities and capacities to deal with this issue. The data shows that the developed world has historically emitted most of the greenhouse gases. The United States and Canada emit about 25% with Europe adding another 21%. Asia and South America emit about 30%. The industrialized world, accounting for 20% of the world's population, is responsible for 63% of the net carbon emissions from fossil fuels.<sup>v</sup> In the future the developing economies are expected to emit relatively more emissions than the developed countries.

However, in the developing world over a billion people live on less than a dollar a day; 1.1 billion lack access to safe drinking water; 2.4 billion lack safe sanitation; and 2.2 million die annually from water born illnesses. In Uruguay, 35% of the population alone has no sanitation and in Madagascar, 33% have no access to clean water.<sup>vi</sup> In the future, as the developing countries rightfully seek to raise their living standards and address poverty, their emissions are expected to increase at a greater rate than the industrialized countries.

Herein lies the crux of the political challenge. The poor have a right to develop to overcome their poverty. This requires a substantial increase in energy use. The richer countries have greater technological and financial resources to address this concern and can adapt more easily. The developing and poorer countries want the richer countries to take the lead and make the initial sacrifices. Europe and Japan appear to be willing to commit to this strategy. The United States is reluctant fearing damage to the economy. The U.S. concern is not one to be dispensed with lightly as the U.S. is the driving engine for the world's economy. The U.S. government is also concerned that unless the key developing countries commit to serious and binding targets and strategies that not only will the economy be hurt but the problem of climate change will not be addressed adequately.

The just completed World Conference on Sustainable Development could represent a building block or stumbling block depending on how nations respond to its achievements and failures. United Nations General Secretary, Koffi Annan, said "this summit makes sustainable development a reality...this summit will put us on a path that reduces poverty while protecting the environment, a path that works for all peoples, rich and poor, today and tomorrow."<sup>vii</sup> This hopeful summary of aspirations is an ideal for nations to rally around. While many critics are fearful that governments will not match rhetoric with resources and people may have exaggerated hopes for these types of conferences, these events can be helpful in setting common global norms and goals, moving the international conversation forward on contentious issues and building political momentum for change.

The conference did set a goal of halving the proportion of people who lack access to clean water or sanitation by 2015. It seeks to restore the rapidly depleting global fish stocks also by 2015 and to reduce the extinction rate of the world's plants and animals by 2010. If these goals are fulfilled, it would represent significant achievements, as Annan suggests. But no agreements were made to improve agricultural trade for poor countries or to set definitive targets for increases in renewable energy resources like solar and wind.

The challenge now is to create the political will to achieve what was agreed upon and search for additional ways to help the poor and protect the environment that nations can commit to.

### **Moral Considerations**

Global climate change is not simply a scientific, economic or political challenge. It is also a moral one. Fundamentally, global climate change raises two major ethical concerns. First, are humans responsible for climate change? If science continues to document that human behavior is contributing detrimentally to climate change beyond natural variability, then to that degree humans have a moral responsibility to address this concern. In their statement on climate change, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, the U.S. Catholic bishops put it this way, “How are we to fulfill God’s call to be stewards of creation in an age when we may have the capacity to alter that creation significantly and perhaps irrevocably?” Second, climate change poses challenges to the common good. Again the bishops state it well. “How can we as a ‘family of nations’ exercise stewardship in a way that respects and protects the integrity of God’s creation and provides for the common good, as well as for economic and social progress?” The moral challenge of stewardship and social justice lie at the heart of human responsibility for climate change.

Catholic social teaching provides an ethical framework for assessing our moral obligations. A cardinal principle of Catholic political ethics is the promotion and protection of the common good. The planet’s climate is by definition “a common good.” As Pope John Paul II has said, “its [the ecological crisis] various aspects demonstrate the need for concerted efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, States and the international community.”<sup>viii</sup> The notion of the common good requires us to take action to preserve and protect this common resource. Our response to this challenge needs to reflect the interdependence of the human family and its dependence upon the atmosphere and its climate for life. Individual nations have to move beyond legitimate but narrow self interest to achieve the global common good if equitable and just solutions to the problems posed by climate change are to be found. The virtue of solidarity, which is applicable in this instance, calls for “international solidarity [as] a requirement of the moral order; world peace depends in part upon this.”<sup>ix</sup>

In a special way, the common good includes solidarity with the poor. Poor people and poor countries have a right to develop. The Church’s conception of “authentic” development is not limited to material gains alone, important as these are, but encompasses social, cultural and spiritual development. The common good and the right to develop carry corresponding rights and responsibilities by the poor and richer nations. But, poorer nations will need special assistance if they are to develop sustainable economic and social strategies to overcome poverty while preventing further damage to the climate.

Richer nations have the necessary financial and technical resources to assist the poor. Since the poor and poorer countries face significant difficulties in mitigating and adapting to climate change, this places special obligations of equity on the shoulders of the more well off countries. The economic freedom, initiative, creativity, technological innovation and entrepreneurship that have characterized the west and the United States in particular, now must be harnessed justly and equitably to assist the poorer nations address climate change.

The U.S. Catholic bishops urge that prudence be the guiding virtue in meeting the challenge of global climate change. Prudence is not, as commonly thought, a safe and cautious approach to decisions. Rather, this virtue enables us to discern what constitutes the common good in a given situation. It is a deliberative method of assessing the empirical data in the light of moral principles to arrive at a course of action to achieve a moral good—in this case, protecting the climate while helping the poor to overcome poverty.

### **How Should We Respond?**

The U.S. Catholic bishops do not offer a detailed policy road map to address climate change. They do offer a framework for policy. The United States should take the lead in an international effort to address climate change more broadly and especially in helping poorer nations build their capacity to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Such leadership acknowledges the United States’ historic responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions as well as its unique political, financial and technological capacity. As citizens, we need to become better informed and advocate for more effective and just measures to support the poor.

While the U.S. Catholic bishops do not endorse or oppose any particular treaty, including Kyoto, they are hopeful that international negotiations and other efforts will be more effective and constructive. The human family has to deal with this issue collectively. Participation by some nations but not others will not work. Nations must find a way to move forward together. But, they cannot do this without proper attention given to poorer nations. Their needs must be central to a just solution.

Even if the science of climate change and an assessment of its impacts are still evolving, we know that the poor already suffer from weather related problems. A “no regrets” policy makes sense in this case. No

regrets policies are measures which should or could be taken in any case. No regrets policies could include assistance to the poor in better natural resource management, debt relief, increased foreign aid, improved trade and financial arrangements, rural development and improved agriculture. The Millennium Challenge Goals that the United States has signed onto call for halving world poverty by 2015. Climate change strategies should be integrated with the Millennium anti-poverty strategies.

Energy use lies at the heart of the policy debate about what to do about climate change. The United States itself needs to adopt reasonable and effective measures of energy conservation and alternative renewable and clean-energy resources in addition to its continued reliance on fossil fuels. U.S. efforts to improve the efficiency of existing energy technologies and to develop alternative energy resources can significantly aid mitigation and adaptation initiatives. We must now find the political will to make these technologies available to poorer and developing countries.

Public policies should offer incentives to businesses to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Support should also be given to workers affected by climate change policies. Mitigation or adaptation to climate change will require businesses to change their way of operating, particularly in the energy sector. Incentives can help ease the transition. This is true of workers also. They should not bear an undue burden. Special assistance to affected workers and their families is a matter of equity.<sup>x</sup>

### **Conclusion**

We should make ending poverty and protecting the environment mutual goals, not conflicting objectives. One should not be used as an excuse for ignoring the other. We should promote a view that eradicating poverty is not only a moral obligation, but its also good policy in dealing with climate change. As Pope John Paul II said in his comments on the recently completed World Summit on Sustainable Development, "In a world that is increasingly interdependent, peace, justice and the protection of creation must be the fruit of the common effort of all in pursuing the common good together."<sup>xi</sup>



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## EndNotes

<sup>i</sup> John Paul II, "International Solidarity Needed to Safeguard the Environment," Address by the Holy Father to the European Bureau for the Environment, *L'Osservatore Romano* (June 26, 1996).

<sup>ii</sup> "Making Sustainable Communities-An Environmental Strategy for the World Bank, Annex F: Climate Change," World Bank

<sup>iii</sup> Impact of US Agricultural and Trade Policy on Global Poverty Alleviation, Charles H. Riemenschneider, Director, Liaison Office for North America, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. A presentation to the Domestic and International Policy Committees of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC, May 22, 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> Fact Sheet, World Health Organization, December, 2001.

<sup>v</sup> Kevin A. Baumert and Nancy Kete, *The U.S., Developing Countries, and Climate Protection: Leadership or Stalemate?*, World Resources Institute, Washington, DC, June 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> Rachel Swarns, "Lack of Basics Threatens World's Poor," *New York Times*, August 29, 2002. p. A13.

<sup>vii</sup> U.N. New Centre, September 5, 2002, item #1.

<sup>viii</sup> Pope John Paul II *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, 1990 World Day of Peace Message, #15.

<sup>ix</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, #1941.

<sup>x</sup> Policy Framework is from the statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, June, 2001.

<sup>xi</sup> Pope John Paul II, Castel Gandolfo, Italy, August 25, 2002.