

CLIMATE CHALLENGE CALLS FOR MORAL LEADERSHIP

CARDINAL O'BRIEN – LEADER OF INTERNATIONAL DELEGATION TO LOBBY WORLD LEADERS AT UN IN NEW YORK

TUESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2009

Over many years I have witnessed the suffering of people living in abject poverty in developing countries. From India and El Salvador to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burma, I have seen the good work done by SCIAF, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, to help those in need. I am always struck by the enormous dignity and fortitude of the people I meet. Yet I know their lives are adversely affected by factors beyond their control.

Such is the case with climate change. Most leading climate scientists are convinced that the climate is warming rapidly. The United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported in 2007 that 11 out of the previous 12 years were amongst the warmest years since records beganⁱ. Further, the UN states that this is being caused by the enormous levels of greenhouse gases emitted, primarily by industrialised countries. They are responsible for 76 per cent of the emissions already in the atmosphereⁱⁱ.

The effects of this warming can be devastating. We are already witnessing changes to global weather patterns including unpredictable changes to the seasons, more frequent and severe storms, floods and droughts. In the future we can expect a greater number of increasingly severe natural disasters to sweep across the planet.

Whilst the issue of global warming and its effects influences all our lives, it is the poor, those who have done least to cause the problem, who are already suffering its consequences and will be hit the hardest. Existing levels of poverty, poor infrastructure, the high dependence on rain-fed agriculture and the limited ability of people already living in poverty to protect themselves from extreme weather events, mean that they are so much more vulnerable than we in developed nations. The UN Development Programme estimated that between 2000 and 2004, 262 million people were affected by climate change related disasters each year, with 98 per cent of those from developing countriesⁱⁱⁱ. A report earlier this year from the Global Humanitarian Forum headed by former Secretary General of the UN Kofi Annan stated that 300,000 people are already dying each year from climate related causes, with a further 300 million affected^{iv}. Access to food, clean water and health is already a huge problem which will be increasingly exacerbated by global warming.

Whilst the debate on the detailed science of climate change will no doubt continue, not acting on the credible and widely supported scientific evidence we do have would be morally reprehensible given the potential consequences,

Behind the numbers are individual people like you and me. In El Salvador, a country I will be visiting again in November, I have heard of people gravely affected by climate change. A farmer named Javier Gomez and his community in Santa Cruz are being affected by more frequent and severe droughts, making it difficult for him to grow food to feed his family. He said: "The climate is changing. The weather here is getting drier every year and the rains are getting less. The weather has changed so significantly that we used to plant maize in May but now we have to plant in June because the rains come later. The rainy season is shorter now."

Vernia Saint Peaux lives in the community of Mombin Crochu amongst the steep, hills in the north east of Haiti. She told SCIAF: “The rains are getting heavier and we are able to grow less and less. I have a small vegetable garden on a steep hillside but in recent years we have been unable to grow crops on some parts of our land because the soil has been washed away by rain. This is a problem for the whole community.”

Whilst the Church and its international development organisations make a huge difference to the lives of some of the poorest people in the world, their work alone is not enough. The scale of global poverty and the way it is being exacerbated by climate change requires an urgent global response from governments. The Church has a moral duty to speak out on behalf of the poor to those who have the means and the opportunity to bring about change.

That is why I am leading a delegation of bishops and Southern climate change experts to meet Heads of States and other key players for talks at the United Nations in New York next week. We will be representing the largest humanitarian and development alliance in the world, made up of the Catholic aid coalitions CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis. We will be calling on world leaders to show moral leadership and make sure they do not forget their responsibilities to the poor in their discussions ahead of their summit in Copenhagen in December.

During my meetings I will be stating plainly that, because wealthy industrialised nations in the developed world have caused the problem of climate change through their large-scale use of natural resources for economic gain, they have a moral obligation to address the problems their actions have created.

Sadly, the best interests of the poor are often ignored in the political wrangling of countries looking after their own national short term interests. This has to stop. Industrialised nations must commit to substantial reductions in their greenhouse gas emissions to help address the cause of the problem. I am backing calls by the CIDSE/Caritas Internationalis *Climate Justice* campaign for wealthy nations to reduce their emissions by at least 40 per cent by 2020 (on 1990 levels) and by 80-95 per cent by 2050.

Developed nations must also contribute to the costs that developing nations incur in mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change and in developing their own low-carbon economies. To achieve this, it is estimated that a further \$150 billion per annum will be needed in addition to existing international aid commitments. This is a large sum. However, it is not acceptable to deny poor countries the right to a more prosperous future when we ourselves live in relative luxury. Indeed, when compared to the \$680 billion spent on the war in Iraq and \$18 trillion spent globally during the recent economic crisis, it is a small price to pay to ensure millions of people have the hope of a sustainable and prosperous future.

God created the earth and entrusted its care to us. We have seriously neglected this important responsibility. It is now time to restore a more sustainable relationship with our environment, so that all human beings have the opportunity to live in dignity. As Pope Benedict wrote in his recent encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate (Love in Truth)*, “the environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it, we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.”^v He has also addressed himself to those attending the forthcoming meetings: “I wish to encourage all the participants within the United Nations summit to enter into their discussions constructively and with generous courage. Indeed, we are all called to exercise responsible stewardship of creation, to use resources in such a way that every individual and community can live with dignity.”

We need collective action. Countries which have created the problem must show the moral leadership and commitment to address it by reducing their emissions and helping those less fortunate to overcome the difficulties they face. The developed nations of the world must give the UN process to tackle climate change the highest political priority over the coming months to ensure the Copenhagen agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol achieves an equitable and binding solution. Heads of State themselves must commit to personally attending the UN summit in Copenhagen to bring hope to those already suffering the effects of climate change and show the political and moral leadership the world needs at this crucial time.

Cardinal Keith O'Brien is Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh and president of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund.

-
- i UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) Fourth Assessment Report Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report.
 - ii Oxfam (2009) Hang Together or Separately? How global co-operation is key to a fair and adequate climate deal at Copenhagen. See K.A. Baumert, T. Herzog, J. Pershing (2005) 'Navigating the Numbers, Greenhouse Gas Data and International Climate Policy', Washington DC: World Resources Institute: 31; J. Hansen, et al (2007) 'Dangerous human-made interference with climate; A GISS model E study', *Chem. Phys.* 7:2287-2312.
 - iii UNDP (2007) Human Development Report: Fighting Climate Change – Human Solidarity in a Divided World.
 - iv Global Humanitarian Forum (2009): Human Impact Report: Climate Change – The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis.
 - v Pope Benedict XVI (2009): Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate.
-