

Global warning

The world's poor will be among the first to suffer if we don't act to save the environment now. By Bruce Duncan

The St Vincent de Paul Society has a proud record of practical concern for people in distress. This concern is expressed not just in immediate hands-on contact with people, but has taken Frederick Ozanam's example to heart, asking why people are poor, and how to devise better social policies to reduce the extent of hardship.

As an international organisation, the Society is naturally concerned with global efforts to lift living standards in the poorer countries, especially as formulated by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. These aim to improve the health and living conditions for the poorest people in the world, reducing by half the number of people living on less than US\$1 a day and in chronic hunger. This concerted international effort is attempting to lift hundreds of millions of people out of the most severe poverty.

Leading international economists like Professor Jeffrey Sachs assure us that this is not a pipe dream, but is readily affordable and achievable if the richer nations are prepared to put the needed resources into the effort. The Vatican and other church organisations have strongly supported this unprecedented humanitarian effort.

However, the environmental crisis brought on by global warming is emerging as a very serious threat to improving living standards in poorer countries. The rapid economic transformation in India, China and elsewhere is further increasing the greenhouse gases that cause global warming.

As various expert speakers reiterated at the Catholic Earthcare conference in Canberra late last year, the environmental issues are extremely serious (see www.catholicearthcareoz.net). It is unfortunately no exaggeration to speak of a looming crisis of catastrophic proportions. Within the lifetime of children today, sea levels are expected to rise significantly, and temperatures in Australia could increase by 4-6 degrees, making many parts of the country virtually uninhabitable.

Rising sea levels will affect all coastal areas of course. Even a rise of one metre will flood some Pacific Islands, and drive hundreds of millions of people from low-lying regions in Bangladesh and the Nile delta in Egypt. Increasingly erratic weather is expected to disrupt global food production, in a period when world population will rise by 50 per cent until it plateaus out.

The most bitter irony is that while the poorer countries have not caused this imminent environmental crisis, they may have to bear much of the price. It is the richer countries, particularly the United States and Australia, which emit the highest per capita levels of greenhouse gases. What has become clear is that western lifestyles, based on high energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, are not only not sustainable, but pose an imminent threat to the whole world. With almost criminal neglect, the US and Australian governments have done little to reduce our greenhouse gases. Future generations will undoubtedly judge this head-in-the-sand attitude harshly.

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It is not just that these governments are closely connected with the hydro-carbon industries of oil, gas and coal, but the global warming crisis threatens the economic growth models that have made us so prosperous in the last 50 years. Sustained economic growth has allowed wider distribution of the economic benefits, backed up by the welfare state with high health and education standards. The 'trickle-down' effects of this prosperity have provided a firm base for social stability, international peace and enhancement of human rights.

All this is now under threat, unless we can quickly develop new, non-polluting forms of energy. It is extremely urgent that western countries reduce greenhouse gas emissions, though Australia and the United States are still increasing them.

Clearly, we have a moral imperative both to help increase living standards in poorer countries, and at the same time reduce greenhouse gases, beginning with ourselves. How can we tackle both these challenges at once? This is the great dilemma the world faces.



We cannot remain locked into our present patterns of economic growth, and unless we can find new sources of energy and better manage scarce resources, especially water, we are heading for a disaster of truly disturbing proportions. What can we do?

First, *we need a new economic model* that encourages restraint in the use of resources and an ethic of frugality. It is hard to see how we can continue our profligate consumerism if we are sharply to reduce greenhouse gases. Some writers have foreseen the need for a steady-state economics, but the need for such a shift into an economics not based on continuous growth has now become pressing. The implications are enormous for governments, companies, international trade and redistribution policies. No wonder policy makers are nervous and uncertain about how to proceed.

In a remarkable development, the economics of E F Schumacher in his 1973 work, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, is having deeper resonance in economic circles. The churches have traditionally urged moderation in lifestyles, but now it is people like Clive Hamilton from the Australia Institute in his recent book, *Affluenza: When Too Much Is Never Enough*, urging a new frugality in use of resources.

Second, as the Catholic Earthcare conference stressed so strongly, we need to take seriously the call *to reduce our personal use of energy and resources*. This is an urgent matter, involving how we design our cities and build our houses,

heating and cooling, our forms of transport, use of water, farming practices and so on.

The political implications are also very demanding. An end to the economics of sustained economic growth will call for astute leadership so as not to destabilise democracies, and greater equity in the distribution of goods and services. Frugality need not mean deprivation, but a more realistic and modest sense of what is needed for a happy and fulfilling life.

It would seem that we are at one of those critical moments in history when the choices made have enormous consequences for later generations. Not only must we move to a more environmentally friendly economy in richer countries, but we must not abandon efforts to raise living standards in poorer countries. It would indeed be tragic if we used the threat from global warming, that industrial countries have caused, as an excuse not to implement the Millennium Development Goals.

Instead we must develop more sustainable technologies and economic policies to support more modest lifestyles, all of which can be shared with the poorer countries so that people everywhere have decent living standards with reasonable life opportunities.

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