

“IT’S JUST TOO HOT! I’M MELTING!”

Peter Henriot

“It’s just too hot! I’m melting!” That was the very forthright comment by one of the women interviewed last week on ZNBC-TV when asked what she thought about the weather these days in Zambia. I smiled – rather sadly! – when I heard her say that, because that could very well be the cry of Mother Earth these days – just too hot!

That’s the topic involving over 6000 delegates from 168 countries, meeting 06 to 17 November in Nairobi. Climate change, global warming, greenhouse gases, ozone layer, Kyoto Agreement, etc., etc. Yes, we’re melting!

Hopefully, the outcome of this United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will not be simply more documents and reports (meaning more trees will have to be cut down for paper pulp!). There are simply too many lives dependent on some strong actions in the immediate future to deal with this issue of climate change.

So what does all this mean for Zambia? A really excellent overview of both the technical concerns and the political issues was offered by columnist Simeo Siame in last Sunday’s POST LIFESTYLE. With very concrete illustrations of how Zambia has experienced this warming trend in the past few decades and some simple but clear explanations of the causes of it, Siame’s article should be required reading in government ministries, civil society groups, churches and schools.

IMPACT ON THE POOR

What is becoming increasingly clear in all the recent reports about global warming is that it is the poor that will be most harshly affected by this climatic phenomenon. And this means the toughest impacts will be felt in Africa. In his speech opening the UNFCCC, Kenya’s Minister for Environment and Natural Resources, Professor Kivuntha Kibwana, stated bluntly: “We face a genuine danger that recent gains in poverty reduction will be thrown into reverse in coming decades, particularly for the poorest communities on the continent of Africa.”

Why is this threat to the poor so great? I’m not an expert in ecological matters but in what I’ve been reading recently three natural phenomenon stand out.

First, because so much of the livelihoods of residents of sub-Saharan Africa are dependent upon agriculture for both food and export, adverse climate changes raise dangers to any realistic efforts to reduce the unacceptable levels of poverty on the continent. Just remember what the mix of drought and flooding has done to Zambian food security in recent years. Overall, a 5% decline in cereal crop-yields is predicted by 2080 by some of the reports, with Zambia explicitly cited as one of the countries with the potentials to be hardest hit.

Second, global warming means rising ocean levels – presenting a threat of destruction to some 30% of the coastal infrastructure around Africa. Being land-locked might prove to be an unanticipated blessing for Zambia! But we can at least sympathise with sisters and brothers around Africa that will experience portions of their productive areas wiped out. Already, flooding in Lagos is causing tremendous problems to industrial, commercial and residential sites as Atlantic waters lap deeper inland. Dar es Salaam and Cape Town are similarly threatened.

Third, melting snows on beautiful African peaks like Kilimanjaro not only mean less attractiveness to tourists but also less water for poor farmers at the base of the mountains and more erratic rainfall patterns throughout the region. Snow packs that took millennia to be created are wasting away at an astounding rate! And the poor feel the effects.

WHY IS IT HAPPENING?

I refer readers to Siame's fine article for explanations of what is causing the increasing temperatures on Mother Earth. Many, many studies have come out in recent years pinpointing the consequences of the burning of fossil fuels with the emission into the atmosphere of carbon dioxides that damage the protective ozone layer above our heads. Global warming follows.

The irony of Africa's predicament in facing global warming, of course, is that this continent has the lowest per capita emission of the so-called "greenhouse gases" that are at the root of the global warming. Yet we face the heaviest consequences!

The industrialised countries of the North are the greatest contributors to global warming. That is why a special treaty was negotiated in 1997 to put into effect measures to limit greenhouse gas production. The Kyoto Protocol, as this treaty is called, is a major step toward dealing with the problem.

Unfortunately, the largest producer of this death-dealing pollution, the United States of America, has refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol. "Not in our economic interests," is the tragic judgement of the increasingly discredited and isolated USA leader, George Bush. We can only hope that the recent elections in the USA could mean some change in this mindless and highly dangerous environment policy.

SO WHAT CAN ZAMBIA DO?

While being highly dependent on the actions – for better or for worse – of other countries, especially the industrialised nations, Zambia can still do some things to improve our environmental situation in the face of the threats of global warming.

First, something must be done to turn around the disastrous trend of deforestation in this country. Whether trees are cut down for urban and rural expansion purposes or for charcoal production, definite requirements and facilitations for reforestation in this country must be mandatory. For example, cut down one tree, plant three new ones! Otherwise, desertification is Zambia's future and we all must learn to live like the inhabitants of the Kalahari to the south or the Sahara to the north!

Second, concern about environmental threats in Africa should be a spur to take steps to ban plastic wrapping and bottling materials in Zambia. It's encouraging to learn that the Government is thinking about forbidding the plastic bags that mess up our surroundings. But what about all the plastic bottles for water and soft drinks? Just look into any ditch along the roads in urban areas and ask yourself if the "convenience" of carrying your drink in plastic bottles is worth the "damage" wrought by such a mess that doesn't disappear.

Third, the Zambian government should put agricultural and rural development as top priorities in the Fifth National Development Plan (FNDP) and the 2007 Budget. Why are inputs traditionally late? Why are markets continually unpredictable? The joy of some recent raindrops was certainly lessened by the sadness of destruction of bags of maize left unbought and uncovered.

Fourth, new investors like the recently welcomed Chinese should be held to very strict environmental controls. It doesn't make sense to express satisfaction with new investment if it is not accompanied by respect for the environment that is the home for all Zambians, present and future generations. Repeats of the current KCM tragedy should be strenuously guarded against.

A FUNDAMENTAL MORAL ISSUE

Environmental issues like global warming at the international level and the ecological concerns mentioned above at the local level are not simply economic and technical matters. They are fundamentally moral issues since they reflect our human role as partners with the community of creation. Ecumenical church groups are speaking out on this with increasing urgency during the current Nairobi conference.

The JCTR Integrity of Creation Taskforce has recently prepared a small study guide on environmental ethics, reflecting not only Christian viewpoints but also African traditional perspectives of respect for the environment. Available at our office, the study guide should strengthen our voices and direct our actions. "I'm melting!" should not be the only response we can make to the challenge of global warming!

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