

Environmental justice: Putting the poor first

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‘To take seriously the cause of the environment, including the issue of climate change, requires that we first take seriously the cause of justice itself,’ argues Brian K. Murphy.

‘The forces shaping many of the socio-economic and health inequalities between poor and rich countries are also driving climate change.’ – Global Health Watch[1]

‘...the use of calamity to reinforce wealth and privilege is exactly what we do not need if we are to overcome the crisis of climate change.’ – Christian Parenti[2]

As the global climate movement takes stock of its efforts, there are certainly significant gains to celebrate. Climate change is clearly, and indelibly, on the agenda. ‘Green’ values adorn even the most mainstream political platforms, and frame at least part of popular consciousness around the world. Even the ‘market’ has seen the light, as corporations and businesses everywhere refine their image to emphasise ecological values and environmental responsibility – even while many clamber to invent a plethora of ways to make a killing on air pollution through the burgeoning global carbon emissions exchange and other schemes.[3]

At the same time, behind the public face of the climate action campaigns there is a deep malaise and debate within civil society circles[4] about the profound and intractable absence of political will at the national and multilateral level to begin to address climate issues in a material and substantive way.

As these strategic debates proceed, it is increasingly important to bring nuance to the environmental discourse within social justice movements. We need to ensure that the way we talk about these matters, and the political deals we make, do not obscure other critical issues or provide an excuse to surrender on fronts where not too long ago we still hoped to make some gains – most particularly the struggle for economic equity and the eradication of global poverty.

The majority of people on the planet do not experience climate change as their most immediate issue of daily life and survival. For far too many, the issues they experience daily are lack of adequate livelihood and income; squalid living conditions; malnutrition and hunger; and debilitating health deficiencies and chronic disease. For others, survival means enduring social and political alienation, repression, persistent war and other forms of violence. Many others face dislocation from hearth and home, community and country. Those millions who do experience environmental concerns are most likely struggling with scarce water above all, and with dirty and dangerous water where water exists. They are struggling with foul and poisonous air, and with rotting homes and streets. And as their landscape is degraded – or stolen from them in the burgeoning ‘land-grab’,[5] a proportion of which is actually subsidised by multilateral green mechanisms[6] – they confront increasingly scarce productive land on which to grow food and nurture their herds.[7]

Regardless of other facts, this is the reality experienced daily by the most abject poor, whose numbers exceed two billion by the most conservative estimates, as well as by two billion more ‘working poor’ whose lives remain a struggle on the margins of progress. This is the reality today, was the reality yesterday, and for decades before that, and will continue to be the reality until the world acts to change it, regardless of the calculus of climate change. Current mainstream proposals for acting on climate change will not significantly change these realities for the poor, not in a hundred years, or a thousand.

On the other hand, serious action to transform the reality of pervasive poverty and squalor would, of necessity, make tremendous headway in turning around global economic and political systems in a way that would allow human society to begin to regain equilibrium with the planet and its complex climatic dynamics. In fact if we do not meet this challenge, it will not be possible to meet the even the minimal goals outlined in reports such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).[8]

It is the poor, the powerless, the excluded, the most marginal on the planet who are most immediately vulnerable to the hazards of environmental pollution, devastated physical and cultural landscapes and climatic shifts, just as they are most vulnerable to the devastation that free-market globalisation has brought to local economies, and the epidemics that are nurtured, along with a host of other blights, in squalid neighbourhoods. Even within global centres of power it is now acknowledged – albeit, only reluctantly – that strategies to address planetary environmental issues will be successful only in concert with serious efforts to end global poverty and assure justice and dignity for all, including respect for traditional ways and ecological wisdom.[9]

The historic inequities within and among nations have persisted in the world in spite of successive ‘development decades’ promoted by the United Nations and the donor countries within the OECD, along with the burgeoning community of national and international NGOs. These inequities have deepened with the hegemony of a globalised free market economy that advertises prosperity for all, but delivers only increasing concentrations of wealth for a minority.

The central reality that is brought into focus by current attention to the global environment and, in particular, climate change, is that these inequities and their associated calamity for billions upon billions of people over these decades will only deepen and become worse in the coming years, due to conditions that already exist and cannot be reversed quickly. Transforming this fatal reality of the poor requires action that gives clear priority to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in ways that are

sustainable and recuperative of people, their communities, the ecology of which they are part, and the planet as a whole. Most of the measures that are required are social, economic and political, not technological.

Some years ago I met a laconic, frayed-at-the-edges Italian priest who had spent years ministering in the sprawling marginal communities of internally displaced people in the Colombian border town of Cucuta.

He said to me, 'It is an indignity to announce the apocalypse to those already living at the end of the world'. Indeed.

If we are to create the will to take the radical measures necessary, we must openly emphasise the reality that even as we start to act in the concerted and uncompromising manner that is required, countless people will continue to suffer year-after-year in the global South due to the structures of inequity built into national and global systems, and due to their commensurate vulnerability to man-made and natural disaster. Between today and the original – and now impossible – 2015 deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals tens of millions of people will die of avoidable causes, and in deplorable circumstances.[10]

To act into the future, it is necessary to acknowledge and take responsibility for the consequences of past and present action and inaction. The focus on climate and the environment cannot be isolated from other critical issues of global justice. Intrinsic to the issues of the environment is the way the planet is run and in whose interest. Environmental justice cannot be simply about preventing what may happen in the future. Environmental justice implies transforming what has been happening for decades, is happening today, and can only worsen in the immediate future as a result of past actions. It implies stopping what we are doing; repairing the effects of what we have done wrong; and creating new ways to do things. It is inevitably also about economic justice, locally and globally; about universal human dignity; and about authentic and inclusive democracy that ensures all people a voice in the choices and decisions about the future they will inhabit.

In the calculus of global climate change the differential and unequal effect on human societies is as important as the effects themselves. As Tom Athanasiou states:

'But the critical issue here, please note, is not scientific uncertainty. More to the point is that climate dangers depend greatly on both wealth and whereabouts. They can't be averaged across national populations, for these populations are themselves divided, most fundamentally by money. The rich, by and large, will be able to insulate themselves from the suffering and the sorrow, at least most of them, at least for a while. The poor, though largely innocent of responsibility for the warming, will bear the brunt of its "impacts."' [11]

To take seriously the cause of the environment, including the issue of climate change, requires that we first take seriously the cause of justice itself. Only if we are able to do that will we have some cause for hope that the other challenges that lie ahead for humanity and the planet, including climate change, can also be met.

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NOTES

[1] From Global Health Watch Report, 2005-06, Section D1 "Climate Change", p. 201, available at <http://bit.ly/ukrjDi> The Global Health Watch is co-ordinated by the People's Health Movement (PHM), Medact, the Global Equity Gauge Alliance (GEGA), and El Centro de estudios y asesoria en salud (CEAS).

[2] Christian Parenti, in "The Bad Future: Climate change vs. civilization", The Walrus, November 2006, available at <http://bit.ly/u0KiMZ> Parenti is paraphrasing the conclusion of Eugene Linden in *The Winds of Change: Climate, Weather, and the Destruction of Civilizations*, Simon & Schuster, 2006.

[3] See: Feffer, John, *The Climate Industrial Complex*, May 18, 2008, FPIF, available at <http://bit.ly/ueh9QM>; Leahy, Stephen, *Carbon Markets Are Not Cooling the Planet*, Inter Press, June 22, 2011, available at <http://bit.ly/sMHAew>; Lancaster, John, "Warmer, Warmer", in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29, No. 6, 22 March 2007, available at: <http://bit.ly/ueICBP>; MacKenzie, Donald, "The Political Economy of Carbon Trading", in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29 No. 7, 5 April 2007, available at <http://bit.ly/rG1WJU> Also the analysis of the Durban Group for Climate Justice, *Climate Justice Now! The Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading*: <http://www.carbontradewatch.org/durban/durbandec.html>

[4] See for example: Athanasiou, Tom, *After Copenhagen: On being sadder but wiser, China, and justice as the way forward*; available at: <http://bit.ly/rq38EL>; Unmüßig, Barbara, *NGOs in the Climate Crisis, Processes of Fragmentation, Lines of Conflict, and Strategic Approaches*, available at <http://boell.org.za/web/cop17-755.html> Ms. Unmüßig is a member of the executive board of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

[5] See, Jun Borrás, Jun, Ian Scoones, and David Hughes, "Small-scale farmers increasingly at risk from 'global land grabbing': New research on the global rush for agricultural land shows that small-scale farmers will increasingly lose out to major corporations as land deals ignore local tenure rights", *Guardian-UK*, April 2011; available at: <http://bit.ly/vAnxfu>

Borrás, Jun and Jennifer Franco, *Towards a Broader View of the Politics of Global Land-grabbing: Rethinking Land Issues, Reframing Resistance*, Transnational Institute-TNI, June 2010; available at: <http://www.tni.org/paper/towards-broader-view-politics-global-land-grabbing>; GRAIN, *World Bank report on land grabbing: beyond the smoke and mirrors*, September 2010; available at: <http://bit.ly/uNsNJT>

[6] See Conant, Jeff, *Massive UN-Supported African Palm plantations leading to oppression, kidnapping and murder*; AlterNet, February 4, 2011; <http://bit.ly/udhCoc>; and, Bird, Annie, *Biofuels, Mass Evictions and Violence Build on the Legacy of the 1978 Panzós Massacre in Guatemala*, Rights Action [<http://www.rightsaction.org/>], Wednesday, 23 March 2011; available at: <http://bit.ly/tqAwZa>

[7] see Ho, Mae-Wan, "Land Rush as Threats to Food Security intensify: Biofuels policies and the 2008 financial and food crisis ignited a worldwide 'land rush' that's increasing world hunger without addressing the underlying long term threats to world food security", in *ISIS Report 28/04/10*, Institute for Science and Society; available at: <http://bit.ly/vMqP20>

[8] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change at <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

[9] See for example the reports from IPCC, and the Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change (October 2006) conducted for the British Ministry for the Treasury at <http://bit.ly/uTcRer>

[10] See, for example, Mathers, Colin D. and Dejan Loncar, "Projections of Global Mortality and Burden of Disease from 2002 to 2030", PLoS Medicine, Vol. 3, No. 11, November 2006, e442 doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0030442, Public Library of Medicine, available at <http://bit.ly/uG0r0R>

[11] Athanasiou, Tom, The Inconvenient Truth, Part II, An EcoEquity discussion paper, January 2007, available at <http://bit.ly/rO6N9h> See also Greenhouse Development Rights: An approach to the global climate regime that takes climate protection seriously while also preserving the right to human development, by Tom Athanasiou, Paul Baer (EcoEquity) and Sivan Kartha (Stockholm Environment Institute), EcoEquity and Christian Aid, November 2006, available at www.ecoequity.org/GDRs



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