



## **Caritas Statement for Global Humanitarian Forum session on Climate change: a new role for humanitarian actors?**

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*Climate change is increasing the scale and frequency of humanitarian emergencies. But does that also mean strategies and policies are outdated? Or is a major expansion of existing programmes to be prioritized over a revamping of these?*

I should say first of all that I am aware that there is disagreement over whether the increasing scale and frequency of climate-related humanitarian emergencies can be scientifically attributed to man-made climate change. But a number of points are clear:

- *We are* witnessing an increase in climate-related emergencies.
- Increasing climate variability *is* making some parts of the world more susceptible to climate-related disasters.
- Factors such as poverty and conflict *are* making populations more vulnerable to the effects of climate-related disasters.

Even if it is too early to say for certain that man-made climate change is causing an increase in humanitarian emergencies, one thing is certain: If it continues, it most certainly will.

Climate change will lead to more frequent severe weather, causing more droughts and floods. It will exacerbate existing threats to human security and will create new ones.

Climate change is certain to aggravate the causes of conflict, such as access to water. The combination of water stress and ethnic tension that already exists in some regions, coupled with climate change, are a recipe for humanitarian disaster.

All these factors have profound implications for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. But the questions posed by this session do not really have an either/or answer. If asked whether our existing programmes need to be revamped or expanded, I would answer 'yes' in both cases.

An awareness of the implications of climate change needs to be built in to practically everything we do now. It is no good implementing programmes on agriculture, water, health, migration, or peace-building, without taking into account the effect that climate change may have on these programmes in the future.

At the same time, the work organisations such as Caritas are already doing in the fields of disaster preparedness and mitigation will require massive expansion. We have already seen the value of this work in places such as Bangladesh where we have constructed cyclone shelters that double up as schools and community centres, and then provide a safe refuge when disaster strikes. Cyclone Sidr in 2007 was one of the worst to hit Bangladesh in recent times, and although 3,000 people died, less severe storms killed 45 times more in 1991 and 100 times more in 1972. This graphically illustrates the need for such programmes.

The effects of climate change will be felt the most by the world's poorest people who live in the most vulnerable locations and lack the resources to protect themselves. Climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and that is why it is vital for humanitarian organisations to relate climate change to the issue of poverty and to address the factors that make people vulnerable to climate change.

At the same time, it is necessary that humanitarian organisations play a full role in the debate over addressing the causes of climate change. We cannot rely solely on politicians to provide an answer to climate change because the solutions are going to hurt.

The unpalatable truth is that there will be a price to be paid for a solution to climate change. And that price will have to be paid by the ordinary men and women of the developed world, who have benefitted from the growth and development that is causing climate change. Like the global financial crisis, the climate change crisis can be seen in terms of excessive borrowing: we have borrowed from the atmosphere and biodiversity of the future. And now these loans will have to be repaid.

This means, quite simply, that high consumers will have to accept a reduced standard of living. This does not mean they will be descending into poverty – but it may mean driving smaller cars, taking fewer holidays abroad, not eating exotic fruits and vegetables all year round, and maybe even paying a little more tax.

There is actually nothing new in this suggestion. Nearly 40 years ago, the Second Synod of Catholic Bishops stated: “*Those who are already rich are bound to accept a less material way of life, with less waste, in order to avoid the destruction of the heritage which they are obliged by absolute justice to share with all other members of the human race.*”<sup>1</sup>

For politicians, grasping this nettle is not going to be a vote winner. It is therefore incumbent on humanitarian organisations to focus on the ethical and moral dimensions of the climate change crisis. The scientific and economic arguments are important, but they are not enough. If we are to change the world, we have to change human behaviour; and a fundamental change in human behaviour cannot be based on short-term expediency. It can only be based on a deep-seated conviction that we have moral duty to care for our fellow human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> Second Synod of Bishops (1971), *Justice in the World*, Chap 1 para 2.