

Climate protection as a social duty

Not only does Caritas Germany offer immediate aid once a catastrophe has happened, but they also engage in disaster prevention in many countries. The challenge here is to combine ecological and social issues and initiate a debate in order to find a solution to the problem.

By Peter Neher, President of Caritas Germany

Fallen trees, destroyed houses and desperate faces: the havoc caused by hurricanes Irma and Maria in the Caribbean was as terrifying as profound. The international department of Caritas Germany provides emergency relief on site. In areas of South Asia, where the severe monsoon rain caused devastating flooding, their employees also plan reconstruction in cooperation with the 45 million people affected and actively engage in disaster prevention as comparable catastrophes are to be expected in the future.

Furthermore, severe catastrophes in other parts of the world made humanitarian aid necessary this year. Long-running heavy rainfall caused landslides and mudflow in Peru and Colombia, resulting in hundreds of fatalities. In East Africa, millions of people are starving as a result of a drought, which causes livestock to perish, watering holes to run dry and harvests to wither. The causes of these disasters are diverse and, rather often, anything but new. Periodically occurring weather phenomena have always had a devastating effect on the varying climate zones: Sometimes they cause prolonged droughts and at other times they lead to torrential rain.

However, it is undisputed in climate research that the frequency of extreme weather situations has considerably increased over the past years due to manmade climate change. Thus, natural weather phenomena have an even greater impact. These consequences of global climate change mainly affect people already living in disadvantaged regions.

In his encyclical "Laudato si", Pope Francis urges people to think about these ecological and social problems in combination rather than see them as separate issues. "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental." (LS 139)

Adaptation to climate change

Disaster prevention as a significant strategy for the adaptation to the consequences of climate change will be an important topic at the UN Climate Change Conference from the 6th to the 17th of November 2017 in Bonn, Germany, under the Presidency of Fiji. Prior to the event, non-governmental organizations are demanding that financial pledges are made at the Climate Change Conference for the reparation of those damages and losses caused by climate change which are already unavoidable in the poorest countries.

Relief organisations like the international department of Caritas Germany are already funding projects which contribute to the adaptation to climate change; they, for instance, build dams and storm-proof buildings or provide help concerning the adjustment of agriculture to altered monsoon and dry seasons. These measures have to be advanced and expanded urgently.

In Peru for example, the biodiverse Amazonian rain forest in the border region close to Bolivia and Brazil is threatened by illegal gold mining. As a consequence thereof, the deforestation of primary forests and the regional impacts of climate change have significantly increased the risk of flooding as well as the periods of extreme droughts.

This process is intensified through the deployment of the slash-and-burn method used to expand agricultural production.

This, in turn, leads to the loss of biodiversity and to even more CO₂ emissions.

The international department of Caritas Germany, together with local partners, wants to break this vicious cycle by, for example, adapting the agroforestry systems. Through the sustainable cultivation of agricultural crops in forested cultures the resilience against extreme weather conditions is enhanced. This project lends support to indigenous people and settler families who run small-scale farms, by furthering their education and facilitating market access for their products. Hereby, disaster prevention and the economic situation of the communities is improved and the protection of forests actively contributes to climate protection.

Completely different climate conditions define life in East Africa. In the regions of Kenya and Ethiopia, people's lives have always been governed by the alternating rhythm of long dry and short wet seasons. Yet, as a consequence of climate change, even here prolonged droughts and severe floods occur more frequently. In Ethiopia, more than 10 million people were dependent on food and drinking water relief due to a long drought in the beginning of 2016. When it finally came, the rainfall was so heavy it led to massive floods and approximately 300.000 people were forced to flee. The next drought followed in 2017.

The international department of Caritas Germany and their local partners provide short- and medium-term emergency aid. As part of disaster risk reduction, which is long-term-oriented, community-based and extensive water management concepts are supposed to enable those affected to protect themselves even better from the effects of such weather extremes. These concepts include the construction of wells, water reservoirs and detention basins, as well as the introduction of more drought-resistant seeding material or more economizing irrigation systems.

A transition concerning consumption and transportation is required

Experts at the World Food Programme assume that roughly half of the humanitarian aid expenses could be saved if a community or region is able to implement well developed strategies for adaptation and coping mechanisms. That is certainly not the only reason why it is mandatory to further advance the protection from extreme weather incidents and climate-induced catastrophes. At the same time, it is equally important to do far more for climate-protection than has been done thus far, in order to at least mitigate the consequences of climate change. This is most of all a requirement for those states mainly responsible for climate-relevant emissions. Alongside the energy transition a change in transportation towards climate-friendly mobility and, finally, a consumption transition is desperately required. Ultimately, the expenditure of natural resources, the industrial production and the global transportation of goods are responsible for the continuously increasing emissions of greenhouse gases.

But the industrial nations - including Germany - are significantly behind on reaching the climate protection goals they set for themselves. By the beginning of April, Germany's carbon dioxide emissions have already reached the level of their annual admissible emissions according to the Paris Climate Agreement.

Although more and more renewable energy production plants are being built, the per capita energy consumption is rising and renewable energy sources cannot counterbalance the harmful greenhouse gas emissions. Responsible for this are mainly the transportation sector, the calorific requirement of buildings and the industrial energy consumption.

Which steps are being taken by Caritas Germany to further climate protection? Their board has added the nationwide advancement of a sustainable and ecological corporate policy within the services and institutions to its strategic goals.

In the spring of 2017, Caritas Germany was audited for the first time according to the “Eco-Management and Audit Scheme” (EMAS) of the European Union, which stipulates high standards for sustainable corporate management and - contrary to other environmental management systems - puts great emphasis on the participation of the staff.

As a result of a cooperation of Caritas Germany and the Association “Green Energy Seal of Approval”, a special rate on green energy specifically for employees of Caritas Germany was offered by the company “Polarstern Energie”, which had been awarded the seal of approval.

The initiative “Energy-saving check” is also very successful in by now about 170 cities and communities and will be continued all through to 2019. Since 2008 more than 500.000 households with limited income have participated in the energy-saving check initiative of Caritas Germany and the Federal Association of Energy and Climate Protection Agencies of Germany and thus reduced their energy costs noticeably. Thus far, the entire energy savings add up to 1.162 gigawatt hours and the carbon dioxide reductions amount to more than 480.000 tons. This initiative shows that projects concerning energy efficiency and climate protection can also generate social benefits.

A more human understanding of progress

The specific task for Caritas regarding climate protection is to combine ecological and social issues and to find solutions in cooperation with the affected people. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce the experiences gained from different projects into public debate.

An understanding of progress, “one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral” (LS 112), as Pope Francis clearly states in his encyclical letter “Laudato Si”, can only be developed through proper dialogue.

When Caritas Internationalis, the global network of Caritas, will point out the severe consequences of climate change especially for the poorest people in the world and demand more climate justice during the upcoming 23rd global Climate Conference from the 6th to the 17th of November 2017 in Bonn, they will also meet the Pope’s demands to enter into a dialogue with everybody. This is the only way to overcome a global system “where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment.” (LS 56)