



justice, peace & creation concerns

ecumenical earth

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Climate change

The World Council of Churches has been working on climate change ever since 1990. when climate change was identified by the scientific community as one of the most threatening social and ecological issues of our times, affecting Creation as a whole.

At the UN Rio Earth Summit in 1992, a WCC working group on climate change was formed with participation of representatives from each region. This group has been the facilitator of the WCC's climate change programme ever since.

In the ecumenical understanding, human-induced climate change is being precipitated primarily by the high consumption lifestyles of the richer industrialized nations and wealthy elites throughout the world while the consequences will be experienced disproportionately by impoverished nations, low-lying island states, and future generations. Climate change is thus a matter of international and inter-generational justice.

Despite the achievements of the international negotiation process (the Kyoto Protocol), we confront a situation where the process must prove its viability or face collapse. That is why the work on climate change continues to be of the utmost importance.

Ethical and theological reflection: the atmosphere as a common gift

Life itself being a gift from God, the atmosphere as precondition to the coming into existence and the continuation of life can be seen as a heavenly gift of loving grace to all life, shared in common by the whole creation. Thanks to this, a subtle balance and interdependence was created between various living organisms and a specific composition of the atmosphere.

In the light of this, protection of the atmosphere is both a moral responsibility and a spiritual answer to the divine invitation that humanity contribute to the creation of a more inhabitable world. Here, spirituality is defined as a practice of living out of gratitude and wonder for the life-sustaining richness of creation, a feeling of deep commitment to all life and to nature as God's creation, and a sincere indignation about all threats to this richness.

The churches' commitment to the issue of climate change grows out of the attentive listening to the most vulnerable and marginalized, and responds to the prophetic call for justice and transformation. These stories together with the Biblical witness of the God of life urge us to affirm that our moral responsibility must be guided by God's love for life and by principles of justice, accountability, solidarity and sustainability.



Small island states - most vulnerable to global warming. Solomon Islands

+ Documents, resources, links on climate change

+ Climate justice for all: A statement from the WCC to the High-Level Ministerial Segment of the UN Climate Conference in Nairobi COP12/MOP2) (17.11.06)

The special contribution of the ecumenical work on climate change to the concerted efforts of many actors (scientists, policy-makers in governments, business enterprises and NGOs) has been its ethical and moral analysis, informed by the growing consensus on the causes and dynamics of climate change.

The urgency of the threat of climate change requires our generation to take immediate action and go beyond simple declarations and statements. New alternative models of life are called for. We challenge all people to move towards a style of life that derives its quality from the attentive enjoyment of nature and human relationships, from mutual care, dependence, trust and solidarity instead of the illusions of individual autonomy and material wealth, from spirituality and feelings of community, connectedness and intimacy instead of one-dimensional self-centredness. We draw strength from insights gained from the rich, community-oriented and simple lifestyles of indigenous and other marginalized communities. We are conscious of the significant contribution these communities, with their low carbon economies, deliver to the stabilization of the climate. We recommend the creation of 'just, participatory, sustainable and sustaining communities' for mutual support and call upon the churches and authorities to join them on this journey with reflection and practical support.

Overview of ecumenical activity on climate change to date

The ecumenical activity on climate change has encompassed ethical and theological reflection on key issues¹; resource development, translation and distribution; advocacy at the international and national levels, including sustained presence at all United Nations negotiations on climate change; regional support for projects primarily in countries of the economic South², and solidarity and accompaniment with churches in areas already experiencing the impact of human-induced climate change, e.g. the Pacific Region (see the **Otin Taai Declaration**).

The World Council of Churches has carried its climate change programme through building networks of engaged people in every region; partnering with member churches, national councils and regional ecumenical organizations in advocacy and project support, including a petition campaign to support agreement on initial reduction targets that finally became the Kyoto Protocol; consulting with scientific, economic, political and technical expertise on climate change within an ethical framework; utilising electronic communication to mobilise and sustain networks; and linking to other interested agencies and organisations within and beyond the ecumenical family.

A study on mobility addressed the destructive effects of transport on the earth's atmosphere and health and came with constructive proposals for alternatives.

Challenges and perspectives for the work ahead

Building on the achievements summarized above and due to the continuing and even mounting critical nature of the issue, the WCC Working Group on Climate Change continues its work addressing the following specific challenges:

A. Preventing the Kyoto Protocol from collapsing:

We emphasize that implementation of the Kyoto Protocol is crucial for future steps towards a just and sustainable global climate policy regime. The major challenges before us are to advocate for industrialized countries to meet their targets within the committed timeframe and to reengage those most responsible for emissions into the global treaty process, in order to make it possible for developing countries to adopt appropriate reduction commitments in the next round of negotiations.

Other challenges include preventing the Protocol from becoming a totally market based instrument without realizing the real greenhouse gas emission reductions and launching a more concerted effort to provide funds for mitigation and adaptation (in the global South) on the basis of equal rights to the atmosphere and the polluter pays principle.

B. Developing a framework for the period beyond 2012:

We are convinced that a much more principle-based approach is crucial for reaching an effective, equitable and justifiable global climate policy regime after 2012, which is the end of the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (e.g. principle of equal entitlements; precautionary principle; priority for the poorest/weakest). Scenarios need to be negotiated that might provide for a range of emission limitation commitments for developed and developing countries depending on their level and pace of industrialization while not jeopardizing sustainable development. Looking towards these upcoming negotiations, the basic framework of

the Contraction and Convergence Model³ is an important starting point for deliberations and negotiations directed to finding a justice-based global approach to climate change.

C. Increasing focus on adaptation to the impact of climate change:

We call for more comprehensive policies supporting adaptation programmes in countries severely affected by climate change, with special attention to the increasing risks related to water resources. In addition the WCC accompanies communities affected by climate change both through ministries of solidarity and presence as well as through practical support of community-based initiatives for adaptation projects and renewable energy systems.

Key to support for affected communities on issues related to climate change is the need for a dynamic and intensive collaboration with denominational and ecumenical relief and development agencies. Persons from these communities participate in ecumenical delegations to national, regional and international events where their voices, stories, experiences and recommendations can be pivotal in ecumenical advocacy positions and activities.

D. Transformation of the prevailing economic model:

We are convinced that a deeper transformation of the prevailing economic model with its focus on unqualified economic growth combined with the tendency to neglect and deny the destructive effects on people and the earth is required to reach these goals. In the context of this, the WCC might intensify its promotion of a shift in energy, industrial and transportation policies particularly in countries with high per-capita consumption, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) up to 80%. Furthermore the WCC should engage in challenging transnational corporations and international financial institutions to take their responsibility in the necessary economic and technological transformation.

E. Identifying new horizons for the witness and role of the churches:

We urge the churches to call publicly for consistent action in implementing the international policy framework on climate change⁴ and to build linkages with related issues. This could include WCC programmes such as the AGAPE process⁵, and JPC focal areas like water, biotechnology, gender and HIV/AIDS. Moreover churches continue to have a role of education and of setting an example both among their members and in society. The development of lived models of an alternative life style that emphasise the value of relationship with the earth, families and community rather than high material consumption levels, are an essential part of this task.

Footnotes

¹ Accelerated Climate Change: Sign of Peril, Test of Faith, 1993; Climate Change and the Search for Sustainable Societies, 1998; Mobility – Prospects of Sustainable Mobility, 1998; The Earth’s Atmosphere – Responsible Caring and Equitable Sharing for a Global Commons, 2000; Solidarity with Victims of Climate Change, 2000; Moving Beyond Kyoto with Equity, Justice and Solidarity, 2004.

² See the Otin Taai declaration, formulated at the Pacific Churches Consultation on Climate Change held in Kiribati, March 2004, endorsed by the WCC’s Central Committee in February 2005.

³ The C&C model defines a differential scenario for the reduction of the emission of greenhouse gases in such a way that a long term sustainable level of emissions is reached over time by having industrialised countries reducing their emissions gradually and letting the poorest developing countries the possibility to have their emissions grow, thereby leaving space for sustainable development.

⁴ UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

⁵ Alternative Globalisation Addressing People and Earth.

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