

# THE CHALLENGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

**David Thomas**

On 14 July 2007, ten campaigners from the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland were joined on Christian Aid's Cut the Carbon march by Mohammed from Kenya, Rosalia from El Salvador, Geanis and Cassia from Brazil, Risolat from Tajikistan, Mahesh from India, Geoff from South Africa, Dwijen from Bangladesh, Demo from the Philippines and Chirhalwirwa from Democratic Republic of Congo. They set sail from Bangor Marina, Northern Ireland, and completed a 1,000 mile march, which ended with a rally in London on 2 October 2007. Their message was simple: climate change is real, it is caused by human activity and we must take urgent action to stop it. Teaming UK and Irish marchers with those from nations in the global South ensured that the voices of those most affected by climate change could be heard. Whilst it is the wealthy who, through their carbon-fuelled lifestyles, contribute most to the process of global warming, it is the poor who most directly suffer from its effects, as we have seen from those affected recently by increased flooding in Bangladesh, typhoons in the Philippines and droughts in Kenya.

I have had the opportunity to witness the effects of climate change when I visited three of Christian Aid's partners in the Philippines in February 2007, one of which was the Social Action Centre in Infanta. The organisation was still responding to a mudslide that engulfed the town of Infanta in 2004. The disaster had been caused by a number of factors including the deforestation of large areas of woodland in the neighbouring Sierra Madre Mountains and the typhoon and associated rainfall that triggered the mudslide. The Philippines is subjected to an average of 20 typhoons each year and climate change is likely to increase that number as it warms the oceans surrounding the islands. On returning to Belfast, I realised that if more people reduced their energy consumption by, for example, turning off their television sets rather than leaving them on standby, then people in the Philippines would be less likely to have to combat the effects of a typhoon. However, one of the problems confronted by climate change campaigners is how to communicate this fact to the young people who have the capacity to make a change.

As a development educator I regularly speak to young people by visiting primary and secondary schools, universities and, in more informal youth settings, church-based youth groups. My challenge is to communicate the issue of climate change (and other development issues) to groups in an engaging way that will allow them to understand what it is, how it works, its impact on people and how we can act to address this problem.

Climate change is a difficult subject for a number of reasons. First, there are some complex and scientific concepts underpinning an understanding of climate change which can present difficulties when speaking to primary school children. However, I have found that in primary schools the children can suggest lots of ways of cutting their carbon emissions, although they may not be able to connect these proposals to the science of climate change or understand why their recommendations could be effective. However, is it really necessary that children understand the science of climate change? Children of all ages understand the concepts of justice and morality and can grasp that when the people least responsible for a problem are those most negatively affected, as is the case in climate change, then positive social change is needed. Focusing on stories of individuals who have witnessed changing climatic patterns and their effect on livelihoods and traditional ways of life is the most effective means of communicating the injustice of climate change.

A second factor than can make climate change a difficult topic to communicate is the fact that it challenges people personally. It is more comfortable to discuss the debt problem of developing countries because we can hold governments and the World Bank responsible. When discussing trade justice, we can hold the World Trade Organisation (WTO) responsible. However, when discussing climate change the uncomfortable reality is that everyone is individually responsible. While governments and big business must take action on this issue, we also need to consider our own carbon footprints and how to adjust our lifestyles to reduce carbon emissions. As a culture, we have become over-reliant on carbon-based fuels to the detriment of the planet and its capacity to sustain future generations without significant life-style changes. However, I believe that today's generation would be willing to take steps toward positive change given a deeper understanding of the causes of climate change and the actions they can take to make a difference. Development education can play a pivotal role in this process of change with its capacity to enhance awareness of the human cost of climate change, particularly in developing countries, and convince the public that action is necessary whether or not it is difficult or inconvenient.

A third factor that makes this issue difficult to address through education is the sense of defeatism that sometimes surrounds climate change. Some commentators on the issue suggest that the global warming has gone too far or that the actions of well-meaning individuals are ineffective when set alongside the carbon emissions of leading industrialised economies like the United States of America (USA). Moreover, the emissions from rapidly expanding economies like India and China will exacerbate the climate change problem as they continue to develop and become more competitive on the world market. However, development education challenges the paralysis

and negativity that surrounds this view of human agency and provides learners with the conceptual space to raise questions and to critically analyse this defeatist viewpoint that is often generated by sources in the print and television media. Rather than ignoring the issue on the basis of inactivity on the part of nation states, we need to galvanise public support for climate change campaigns that will make the case for political, economic and individual action irrefutable.

Despite the difficulties encountered in communicating the importance of climate change there are also opportunities to be gained from exploring this issue. From a development education point of view the issue is one that clearly demonstrates the interconnectedness of the world. Globalisation is not a modern phenomenon when it comes to the global climate or atmospheric gases, neither of which is bound by state borders. The carbon emissions of each individual in each country collectively have a global impact on climate change through which we are all connected and all have a responsibility to one another. Climate change arguably demonstrates this link better than any other topic and the issue of personal responsibility can be an empowering factor that persuades us to act for the benefit of others. In respect to other campaigns, a young person may well feel that their actions will not make a difference because politicians are less likely to listen to them. However, anyone can make a difference in respect to climate change, albeit one of many drops in the ocean, by cutting their own carbon emissions. This provides young people with an opportunity to do something positive by taking action themselves rather than trying to effect change indirectly through, for example, letter-writing or postcard campaigns.

Regardless of the challenges and opportunities presented by climate change, it is an issue that must be engaged with by those involved in development education. In the words of Nazmul Chowdry from Practical Action in Bangladesh you can 'Forget about making poverty history...climate change will make poverty permanent'. Those of us involved in education have an important role to play in convincing a generation to confront the most important issue of our time.

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