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Food Justice Network UPDATE

The Food Justice Network is a community of supporters, staff and members of Canadian Foodgrains Bank engaging in issues of hunger and injustice. We invite you to join us.

END HUNGER

Canadian Foodgrains Bank
A Christian Response to Hunger

What Does Justice Require?

Imagine if you will, being stripped of all your personal identifiers. You don't know what your gender is, what the colour of your skin is, whether you are rich or poor, young or old, or even where you were born.

The eminent American philosopher John Rawls devised a thought experiment like this to theorize about the principles of justice. He was convinced that if people stepped behind such a veil of ignorance they would agree that social and economic structures should be arranged to benefit the most vulnerable members of society. After all, those people might include you or me.

Imagine climate change from this perspective.

What should justice look like for those suffering the worst effects of changing climate? Should it involve an international treaty in which every country must equally cut emissions? Or should some countries shoulder more responsibility based on their role in causing the current problem? Should such an agreement include a sharing of resources from rich countries to poor countries so that those who are most vulnerable can adapt to changes already occurring?

These questions, of course, aren't merely theoretical.

This December, a major UN climate conference in Copenhagen, Denmark will aim to find agreement on a new climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol which expires in 2012. What happens in Copenhagen matters deeply. Negotiators will seek to establish substantial binding targets on emissions, while also agreeing on how to help those who are already suffering from climate change.

The post-2012 agreement also has enormous implications for the Foodgrains Bank's efforts to end hunger. It is now widely accepted that greenhouse gas emissions are the primary cause of climate change, and that the worst impacts of climate change will be felt in developing nations, in the form of increased droughts, greater flood damage, stronger storms, sea level rise, and spread of human and livestock diseases.

Those who already struggle each day to get enough to eat will face additional risks from climate change. For smallholder farmers whose livelihoods are linked to the natural resource base, such changes in rainfall, temperature and declining yields will significantly increase vulnerabilities at the community and household level. They will need assistance to adapt to their changing world.

Canada is one of the top 10 emitters of greenhouse gas emissions, emitting 16.52 tonnes per capita in 2006 (compared to a world average of 4.28 tonnes per capita, and rich country average of 10.93 tonnes per capita). Our historic emissions have helped build our economy into one of the strongest in the world. They have fuelled

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technological innovation, helped us produce more food, and made our lives more comfortable – while contributing to the current problem.

Canada is also one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We can afford to reach out to others with a helping hand. We also have a strong voice on the world stage. Our leaders could speak on behalf of those whose voices are rarely heard.

This is why, in view of the Copenhagen conference, the Foodgrains Bank is calling on the Canadian government to support a substantial increase in funding by all developed countries for climate change adaptation in developing countries.

This funding should be additional to existing development assistance, so that other vital areas, such as health and education, aren't neglected. This assistance should be given in the form of grants, not loans, and developing countries should be fairly included in decision making about funding. Adaptation funding should focus on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable peoples, especially smallholder farmers, many of whom are women.

This is about agreeing to a treaty that is fair for all, one that benefits the most vulnerable people in society—those who have done the least to cause the problem. This is what justice looks like. Surely, it's what we would all agree to behind a veil of ignorance.

—Carol Thiessen recently joined the Public Policy team as Policy Advisor at Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Lost in Translation

Adaptation: Changes in policies and practices to deal with climate threats and risks. Adaptation measures include changes that protect livelihoods, prevent loss of lives, or protect economic assets and the environment.

Conference of the Parties (COP): The negotiating process on climate change revolves around the sessions of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP), which meets every year to review the implementation of the Convention. The 15th COP of UNFCCC will convene in Copenhagen, Denmark with the goal of agreeing on a new global climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol which expires in 2012.

Greenhouse gases (GHGs): Atmospheric gases that trap heat from the sun in the Earth's atmosphere. The most common greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, ozone and water vapour.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): The international scientific body set up by the World Meteorological Organization and the U.N. Environment Programme in 1988 to provide an objective and neutral source of information on climate change. The IPCC's periodic assessment reports are reviewed and approved by experts and governments.

Kyoto Protocol: A binding agreement that requires 37 countries and the European Community to reduce their human-caused greenhouse gas emissions 5 percent collectively from 1990 levels in the period 2008-12. Canada agreed to cut its emissions by 6 percent from 1990 levels (in 2007, Canada's emissions were 33.8 percent above its Kyoto target). More than 180 countries have signed the protocol.

Mitigation: Policies and behaviours designed to reduce greenhouse gases and increase carbon sinks. Carbon sinks are activities or mechanisms, such as soils, forests and oceans, which remove CO2 from the atmosphere and store it.

Sources: Worldwatch Institute, UNFCCC, Environment Canada

Food Security and Climate Change

Climate change will have serious consequences for agriculture and food security.

While the task of calculating how many people may actually go hungry as a result of climate change is highly complex, the 2008 UNDP Human Development Report projects that 600 million more people could be at risk of hunger worldwide because of climate change by 2080. That's twice the number of people living in poverty in sub-Saharan Africa today.

Climate change is expected to impact all four dimensions of food security: food availability, access to food, stability of food supplies and the ability to utilize food.

Globally, according to the 2007 IPCC assessment report, food production may increase with temperature rises in the range of 1 to 3°C, but will decrease after this. And food availability will be mixed and vary regionally, with food insecure regions being negatively affected already.

For example, food production from rain-fed agriculture in Africa—up to 75 percent of all agriculture in Africa—could decrease by 50 percent by 2020. Yields in Asia could decrease by up to 30 percent by 2050 in Asia. And smallholder agriculture in Latin America could also be hit hard, because irrigation is limited and because the staple crop, maize, is highly sensitive to climate.

Increased frequency and intensity of droughts and flooding will affect the stability of and access to food supplies. Coastal erosion and inundation of sea waters in low-lying areas will lead to further loss of croplands and increased food insecurity.

Finally, even if food is available, a person's body must be in good physical condition to properly use it. With climate change likely increasing the number of people exposed to diseases, such as cholera and malaria, food utilization will be an additional challenge for many people.

—Carol Thiessen, Policy Advisor, Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Climate Change and Scripture

Climate change disrupts creation and threatens the existence of many of God's creatures. Disruptions in the form of climate change which affect humanity and its various systems are the focus of world wide debate and calls for action. Some people call for changes which they hope will permit human society to continue as it is; others call for radical change in the current industrial system. As Christians we should be asking ourselves, "What future do our scriptures call us to?"
God's intention in creation is made clear in the second chapter of Genesis—we are to tend 'the garden', to be the care-takers of creation in all that we do. This is an important part of the central commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul." Furthermore, with the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has started a process of renewing all of creation, including each of us. That process relies strongly on our actions—as Paul says in Romans, "All creation waits to be set free from its bondage to decay and to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." We are to seek our glory, the glory of being reconciled to God and his creation. And at one moment, Jesus will reappear and this renewal process will be completed. As followers of Christ we are called to actively work as agents for this renewal process, a renewal that will include all of creation. Currently climate change threatens to take creation in the opposite direction. Increasing drought and floods in many countries and rapidly warming temperatures in places like the Arctic are undermining the basis of survival for millions of people and thousands of other species.

So what does this mean for Christians here and now confronted by the increasing frequency of droughts and floods and the disruption of normal seasons that are appearing, many driven by climate change itself? First we must remind ourselves of God's call to care for creation, to tend creation so that it can flourish. If our demands on the atmosphere, land and water exceed what can be taken without endangering their use by others—succeeding generations and other creatures —we must reduce those demands. Second, we must consider what we can do to be agents of renewal in creation, to heal what is broken. Climate change is hurting many people and places—in love we should be actively engaged in helping those people and places to adapt in ways that restore and increase the fruitfulness of the land.

We can't know for sure what the future holds. Many scientists and economists paint a dark picture. But God's intention in creation is clear and we believe that his love can overpower any brokenness. We know the future to which we are called and we know that each of us must play a part to get there.

—Stu Clark is a Senior Public Policy Advisor at Canadian Foodgrains Bank

How is Foodgrains Bank responding to climate change?

The Foodgrains Bank responds to requests from our overseas partners, to assist with the problems they identify in their own country. Some partners have asked us to help them adapt to changes they are experiencing in their climate. Our response can help them recover from climate-related damage that has already occurred, and it can help to reduce the risk of climate-related damage in the future.

In Northeast India, the monsoon rains are becoming less predictable, both in timing and height of floods. This has resulted in lost crops, as well as damage to homes and schools. The Foodgrains Bank, through MCC Canada and CASA (partner in India), is helping people repair buildings and restore fields. We are also supporting activities to reduce future vulnerability to flooding, such as raising the height of embankments.

East Africa has the opposite problem—droughts which seem to be getting more frequent. In Zimbabwe, the Foodgrains Bank, through the United Church of Canada and Christian Care Zimbabwe, is promoting conservation farming techniques. These techniques aim to improve soil texture, so yields are optimized in low rainfall situations.

Parts of Kenya have had no rain for over a year, and farmers are anxious to save as much water as possible when the rains eventually fall. In that situation, MCC Canada is working with Excellent Development (Kenya), using "food for work" to build sand dams that will store rainwater for later use in tree nurseries, irrigation and for household use.

Our website has short summaries of all our international projects, listed by country or by church member. Go to www.foodgrainsbank.ca/international_programs.aspx

—Paul Hagerman is the Public Policy Manager at Canadian Foodgrains Bank

To join the Food Justice Network send an email to foodjustice@foodgrainsbank.ca.