

Copenhagen – our future at stake

Tim Root proposes an action plan to avert runaway climate change

December's United Nations climate change conference in Copenhagen will be the most important meeting in human history. The British government has underlined its significance, saying that 'we cannot afford to let this opportunity pass'. The urgency of international action to reduce climate change is shown by the considerable evidence that we are approaching 'tipping points', at which the earth's reaction to rising temperature would cause irreversible runaway heating. Examples of such reactions include the imminent total loss of Arctic sea ice during the summer months. Ice reflects heat back into space, but when it melts the sea water absorbs the warmth, accelerating the melting of the massive Greenland ice sheet. These reactions would lead to an escalation in the frequency of extreme weather events, such as August's devastating Typhoon Morakot, and severely harm food production.

Climate change

Climate change is already causing 300,000 deaths, and damage worth £78 billion, every year. If emissions are not reduced enough, by 2030 climate change will cause the deaths of half a million people per year, and about 75 million people will have become refugees. If as present trends suggest, temperatures rise by 3C or more, no less than 330 million people could be flooded out of their homes, and global food production would be 'very likely' to decrease. As the world's population is expected to rise by over a third by 2050, mass starvation and severe conflict would be the likely result. For the sake of our children and grandchildren, we must do all we can to prevent this. It will cost much less to do so now than later, when the problems have become completely unmanageable.

Climate change is also the ultimate issue of injustice; no less than 98% of its current victims are in the developing world, which will continue to be more vulnerable than the developed nations. Getting governments to

agree on investing to reduce climate change will be difficult. But we can be heartened by international public opinion. A poll in eleven diverse countries last September found that nearly four out of five people believed that their country's Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) emissions should either be reduced by the same percentage as those of all other countries, or more (to allow less developed countries to grow). Only about one in ten wanted their own country's emissions to be allowed to grow, or opposed the aim of cutting global emissions.

A twenty-one nation poll in September 2007 found that two-thirds of people believed it necessary to 'take major steps very

Climate change is also the ultimate issue of injustice; no less than 98% of its current victims are in the developing world

soon' to reduce climate change. Among the countries likely to exert significant influence at Copenhagen, this view was endorsed by three-fifths of Americans, and substantially higher proportions of Brazilians, Britons, and Mexicans. Nearly three-quarters of people agreed that wealthy nations should provide finance and technology to developing countries, which, like the developed nations, should also limit their emissions. Seven in every ten Americans endorsed this position, a proportion which has probably grown since President Obama has emphasised the importance of climate change.

Similar evidence can also be found in the Eurobarometer poll conducted this January and February, and a May 2008 poll in which nearly three-fifths of Britons supported investment 'now in renewable energy even if it increases the price of energy' which only one sixth opposed.

Effective deal

However at present the prospects for an effective deal at Copenhagen look poor. The UN's chief negotiator Yvo De Boer expressed considerable pessimism after the talks in Bonn in August.

Obama's chief climate negotiator, Jonathan Pershing, said there is quite a significant uphill battle if 'we are going to get there'. The developed nations' planned emissions cuts are currently far too small to convince developing nations that they should start to cut their own emissions. Yet if we don't prevail upon China and India to limit their increasing emissions, our prospects are dire. Governments' reluctance to face up to climate change is partly based on pessimism that investments their nation might make would be in vain if not matched by those of other nations. Therefore they seem to conclude 'why should we bother then?' But while no one wants their generosity to be taken for granted, suicide is not a rational response. When a boat starts to fill with water, sailors do not refuse to bail it out because some of their number are not helping. Each nation needs to tackle the emergency at the same time as pressuring others to help. This is perfectly feasible; China and India accept that climate change needs to be tackled, and are starting to invest large sums in renewables. They are simply driving a hard bargain because the West, being the major polluters both within their own borders and through the goods they import, should take the major responsibility, which developing nations cannot afford to bear.

Irresponsibility

Governments' irresponsibility shows that we need creativity and boldness in considering how civil society can push the politicians into an effective agreement. Each government knows that achieving the international co-operation required for an effective agreement is somewhat unlikely, and therefore that it can plausibly deny responsibility if the outcome is inadequate. The key therefore is to show each leader that a high proportion of their citizens, well in excess of committed environmentalists, will impose a severe political punishment on them unless their role at the conference is exemplary. The best vehicles to achieve this would be an international petition which

inspired activists to gather many thousands of signatures, and a multi-national opinion poll showing that a high proportion of people consider it very important that Copenhagen produces an effective agreement. Such a petition would gain much more publicity if it was global and backed by high-profile public figures. Citizens would be more likely to sign it, as its global coverage would appear more likely to influence this global issue. Many more activists would work on such a petition if they knew that their counterparts in other key countries were doing likewise. My proposal for a global petition has been supported by Desmond Tutu, Bianca Jagger, Diane Abbott, and Clare Short. No doubt other well-known people would also back the idea if it was adopted by respected NGOs.

Declaration

Such a petition must show that we are not simply asking politely, and will not be fobbed off. Therefore declaration might be a better name for it. It must state that we will not vote for politicians who fail to tackle climate change urgently. It must also threaten retribution against governments which fail to cut emissions promptly. This could best be achieved by a boycott of selected goods from those countries. Once people realised in the 1980s that aerosol sprays harmed the ozone layer, their sales slumped. The same could happen with certain Canadian exports if a campaign was launched against that coun-

at Copenhagen, namely the USA, India, Japan, Brazil, Germany, Britain, South Africa, Mexico and France. This would be a reasonable strategy as fifteen countries account for three-quarters of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Some activists have pointed out that politicians do not attach much weight to polls on issues like climate change, which they consider marginal for most voters. Therefore it is suggested that it is better to concentrate our efforts on organising demonstrations and letters to legislators, maximizing the impact of those we can rouse to activism.

Severe risk

While such pressure will have a positive effect, there is a severe risk that politicians will conclude that only an activist minority really care about climate change. This would be a recipe for disaster. It is vital that we raise the profile of Copenhagen, so our leaders know there are a significant number of votes to be lost if they fail there. This will not be easy. But as Copenhagen is such a crucial event, we need to take the calculated risk of aiming to show that we can win the breadth of support needed to sway governments. Otherwise our lack of confidence will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

there is a severe risk that politicians will conclude that only an activist minority really care about climate change. This would be a recipe for disaster.

try's production of oil from tar sands, a process which emits huge quantities of CO₂. The petition or declaration should also follow the advice of campaigning experts to emphasise the conflict between human need and our complacent rulers, by suggesting that leaders who neglect climate change should be punished in court. These controversial aspects of the declaration could gain the publicity needed to worry governments.

A poll could be undertaken in all or most of the relatively small number of democratic countries which will exert a major influence

We saw the power of public opinion in Britain with *Friends of the Earth's Big Ask* campaign, which got nearly 200,000 people to contact their MP, either asking for a Climate Change law to be brought in, or later to demand that the proposed law be strengthened. As a result parliament passed the world's first law placing a duty on the government to cut carbon dioxide emissions. We could achieve a similar breakthrough with the right kind of campaign and opinion poll. The polls described above show that the results would be very likely to support scientific advice to cut



Naked truth: our leaders must not fail at Copenhagen

emissions promptly. And if the results were shared with the world by people of the stature of Desmond Tutu, we could get our governments to take their heads out of the sand.

You can help!

In Britain we must capitalise on the coming election, showing Labour will lose millions of votes if leaders fail at Copenhagen. We can tell the other parties to put pressure on the government to negotiate effectively at Copenhagen. Please write to your MP, saying you are considering which party to vote for in the general election, and asking what he or she will be doing to influence an effective agreement at Copenhagen. Please also put Saturday 5 December in your diary, to attend what will be a large march in London to demand an effective agreement in Copenhagen. See www.stopclimatechaos.org/the-wave

There is a fully referenced version of this article at www.timroot.net

Tim Root is a Friends of the Earth activist, and author of Love, Empowerment, and Social Justice: Personal Relationships and Citizen Action (Open Gate Press, 2005)