

The Environment and Sustainable Development

Report to ACC-14 from the Anglican Observer at the United Nations

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Program Areas

The core of our program encompasses the fundamentals of survival in terms of air, food, and water, and how they are organized economically, socially, and politically.

In the past, we have also focused on issues involving biodiversity, and still do, although the overall concern of our efforts today is in keeping with the Millennium Development Goals. These program areas and their extreme urgency are briefly outlined below.

(1) Climate Change and Renewable Energy.

The scientific consensus on climate change is not difficult to describe. According to James Hansen of NASA, probably the best spokesperson in this field, the number we need to watch is 350 parts per million (of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere). That is the number beyond which we cannot go without significantly changing the biosphere -- the ecological conditions of the earth to which life as adapted. We have already gone well beyond it -- to 387 parts per million. According to Hansen and many others, unless we bring the number down to 350 by 2030, changes in the biosphere now underway (e.g., the melting of the Arctic) will be irreversible. Hence, the necessity of making the transition to renewable energy immediately. The Intergovernmental Panel to Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that the transition must be significantly underway by 2012. This is probably accurate.

(2) Food and Agriculture

A central tenet of the UN's work in the environmental and sustainable development is that solutions to the environmental crisis cannot be separated from the elimination of poverty. This puts the local community at the heart of any viable sustainable development strategy. With regard to food and hunger, we have two courses of action. We can invest further in the globalized, corporate strategy for producing food at the expense of local communities, or we can complement the corporate strategy by strengthening community-based agriculture and supporting local farmers. In most areas of the world, small and medium-sized farmers need financial help and technical assistance with depleted soils, water management, and the replacement of harmful pesticides with organic methods. The second approach, which builds sustainable communities, has the advantage of not only preserving biodiversity and the health of watersheds, forests and soils, but also drawing upon local knowledge and decreasing reliance on uncertain overseas markets. Unless policies are adopted in poverty-stricken areas to actively support the livelihoods of small farmers, especially women, then vulnerability to hunger and malnutrition will markedly increase in the years ahead.

(3) Water

1.1 billion people worldwide lack access to clean water; while global consumption doubles every 20 years -- twice the rate of human population growth. To help solve these problems, we work in accordance with the 1999 Dublin Conference on Water and the Environment, which advocates participatory strategies involving users, planners and policy makers at every level -- especially women -- as well as proclamations made at the 2001 Water for Peace and Nature Summit that affirm the intrinsic value of water (over and above its commercial value). This approach establishes water as a fundamental human right and collective responsibility, rather than a private commodity.

(4) Community Development and Corporate Responsibility

In 2008, the Advisory Council voted unanimously to become a member of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR). The intent was to raise issues and questions which might help the church move in the direction of greater human rights, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development. This decision was made with the understanding that the environmental crisis threatens, even destroys, all kinds of communities, including human communities. At the same time, the current global economy may bring material comfort to a minority, but it seriously undermines the functional integrity of most local communities. Thus, the solutions we must seek require the creation of environmentally sustainable and just human communities and the adoption of strategies for economic development that help them thrive.

The Current Context of our Work

At least since the Rio Summit in 1992, the overall strategy for sustainable development adopted by the UN (here "the UN" means its member nations, departments and programs) has been largely based on assumptions rooted in the neo-liberal economic system. The implementation of Agenda 21, for example, has depended on technology transfers to developing and least-developed nations and large amounts of development assistance. It was assumed that profits gleaned from economic growth in developed nations would produce funds needed to make sustainable development happen everywhere. Although this system had some marginal success, the current global economic meltdown calls these assumptions into serious question -- which, to be blunt, means that we (humankind) are in deep trouble.

Furthermore, the political and social structures on which these assumptions were based have been shaken on almost every level. This applies as much to the church and NGOs as it does to nations and multinational economic organizations.

The result is that we must redouble our efforts to create viable, workable structures relating to our work -- structures that keep communication and collaboration open across the Communion, both to and from our Office, so we can advocate effectively on their behalf at the UN.

CURRENT GOALS: Forming stronger linkages with the Anglican Environmental Network and the creation of a thematic working group to assist us in our work

Given these circumstances, one of our immediate goals is primarily organizational; that is, we are in the process of reorganizing how we go about doing our work. We already know that we need more committed involvement from the Provinces in connection with the environment and sustainable development. However, this is not to say that the involvement and enthusiasm demonstrated by the Provinces so far has not been substantial, because it has been substantial. ACC resolutions and declarations that had their origin at the Global Anglican Congress on the Stewardship of Creation in 2002 and others made at the first meeting of the Anglican Environmental Network in Canberra in 2004 have been significant. They have given us the authority to speak and advocate at the UN on behalf of the Provincial representatives who made them. Nevertheless, this kind of involvement, important as it is, is still not enough given the world's current condition -- when local conditions are rapidly changing and the need for even greater participation is essential.

For that reason, among others, adequate, effective participation from Provincial representatives in a Thematic Working Group for the UN Office is also an immediate, timely, and urgent goal. This Working Group will be composed of Anglicans with special interest and/or expertise in our major program areas (climate change/renewables, food and agriculture, water, community development and corporate responsibility). The accomplishment of this goal depends, in large part, on developing an ongoing working relationship with the Anglican Environmental Network. We hope to form this Working Group from key members of the Network, who will help us advocate on all issues at UN meetings, including, for example, the Commission on Sustainable Development and a variety of other meetings and conferences related to our program areas. Overall, our goal is to create a vital link with all the Provinces, through the Environmental Network, so we can advocate at the UN on behalf of the Anglican Communion in the most effective way.

Finally, an important meeting of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will take place later this year in Copenhagen. We will be at that meeting, and will work in whatever way required to make the Network's presence there timely and worthwhile. Archbishop Rowan Williams has shown great support for all our efforts in this area of our work, and we offer him our sincere gratitude.