

Climate action now!

Failure to respond to a human tragedy

Time is running out to reverse humanity's impact on climate change. Yet, argues **Richard Worthington**, in southern Africa we are dragging our heels. South Africans, and the labour movement in particular, need urgently to mobilise a response to this threat to human life on our planet.

One could get a dry mouth, reading the findings of the latest *Assessment Report* of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Alarm is the only rational response, particularly in southern Africa, where the impacts of climate change are expected to displace millions of people. Whether this will be in the region of 10 or 100 million will depend on how we heed the alarm that is now starting to sound clearly in international relations. Heeding the alarm means deciding on a response, including agreeing on what is the appropriate level of response, to this global impact of industrialisation, with its fossil fuel addiction.

The objective of the United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change is to "prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system." What has not been agreed, and is so fiercely resisted by the likes of George Bush, is what level of human impact is 'dangerous'. So far only the European Union and the Alliance of Small Island States have adopted a target to keep global warming 'below 2°'. Not that this would be without serious impacts, but they are considered manageable.

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) stress the need to keep as far as possible below 2 degrees, relative to pre-industrial average global temperature. There has already been over 0.7° warming and at least 1.5°C is locked into the system by emissions to date.

DEVELOPING COUNTRIES RESIST CLIMATE ACTION

Many developing countries are resisting determining a clear objective, nervous of implications for their own actions. This despite the stipulation in the Convention that action should be equal to responsibility and capability. This is real head-in-the-sand behaviour: if we don't look too closely, it may not be too bad. In fact the reverse applies: the less we look, the worse it will be.

Southern Africa is one of the most vulnerable regions, yet none of our leaders are demanding or articulating an appropriate response. The IPCC indicates that to keep global warming in a range between 2.0 and 2.4°C, global emissions will need to peak by 2015 and then decline.

So, if the world achieves the

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set for 2015, this progress will soon be undone if we have not halted the growth of greenhouse gas emissions within the same deadline. Former US vice-president Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* avoided naming corporate polluters, and also ducked some of the most inconvenient aspects of the truth that

- Climate change is a consequence of the current development paradigm. The current global economic centralisation and growth path is not sustainable. We have a limited and diminishing resource base. We are already over-stepping and reducing the carrying capacity of the planet, while population is still growing.
- Market growth concentrates and diminishes, rather than sharing and nurturing real wealth.
- Ecological integrity is more valuable than the escalation of figures on market growth charts or trader's results.

South Africa is rushing headlong into more carbon-intensive development. It is sustaining subsidies to the minerals sector, especially fossil fuels. It is also investing public resources in infrastructure based upon this, which will probably result in massive assets stranded halfway into their lifespan. The intent here is clearly short-term economic growth, which means more money in the system, particularly for those who claim it is 'creating wealth'. It is also pronouncing that the wealth will be enough for the poor to benefit somewhere down the value chain.

The question for organised labour is whether to respond in the tradition

of defensiveness, in the face of 'green' or 'environmentalist' issues, or whether to encourage social mobilisation in pursuit of the benefits offered by a collective and decisive response to the challenges of global warming. Such challenges face 'inertia' as the climate system responds to human emissions of greenhouse gasses over generations, rather than terms of office. Environmental challenges are not malleable to short-term interests, or amenable to negotiation and cannot benefit from short-term compromises.

People have been known to die of thirst, waiting for the trickle-down effect of economic growth. The public benefits of achieving the 'fundamentals' for a globally competitive economy are supposed to happen when South Africa hits the magic GDP growth target. In the mean time, many opportunities to address both national productivity and income distribution, which would reduce growing carbon emissions without compromising economic growth, are clear, but not utilised. Rejecting international pressure only blinds us to our own self-interest.

SOME TALK OF REFORMS

However, there is some talk of fiscal reform, possibly including a carbon tax, with targeting to avoid damaging impacts on low-income households. This could extend to the deployment or 'recycling' of the revenues raised, for anything from a reduction in VAT to a public works programme on biomass. Imagine a 'Working for Energy' programme that puts greater value on supplying local energy services than the centralised liquid fuels market.

There are many avenues for developing a rational climate change response. The cabinet-mandated Long Term Mitigations Scenarios (LTMS) is



entering the 'high-level' stage going into 2008. The Department of Minerals and Energy launched, at a National Energy Summit in September, a process to review the 1998 White Paper on Energy Policy that will include a series of provincial 'mini-Summits'. Also up for review in 2008 are the renewable energy target and the Energy Efficiency Strategy including the Accord with business, which relies on a voluntary approach.

Government is also promising a climate change response strategy for the water sector. Most of South and southern Africa will become drier over coming years, yet we have to increase access to water for many people still without adequate supply. We also need to extend access to 'modern' energy services. Yet South Africa is planning to massively increase water consumption in the energy sector as a result of increased coal use, most heavily through liquid fuel production, but also significantly for electricity generation. Water resources are diminishing from both ends of the fossil fuel chain. It is poor people who are the most vulnerable to the impacts of thoughtless fuel consumption, from which they will finally receive a poor service.

Failure to respond effectively to

humanity's impact on our ecosystem, and most alarmingly on the climate system, will be a human tragedy. The 'environment' and the conditions on earth during humankind's development may be radically changed. The question really is how much of humanity, not only in terms of numbers, but also in diversity, range over the earth and ingenuity of social organisation, will survive the consequences of unchecked consumption.

The inertia in the climate system, the lag between greenhouse gas emissions and their impact, and the planetary scale at which this plays out, makes this a challenge that can only be met with global cooperation. Only mandatory measures will deliver dependable results. Industrialised countries with the most responsibility, arising from cumulative emissions, must take the lead. However, their level of ambition will depend in part on the level of commitment to constrain emissions' growth, adopted by rapidly industrialising countries, including South Africa.

EMBRACING A COMMON AGENDA

To achieve economy-wide benefits that will accompany climate-



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responsive policies and measures, (including benefits that are becoming evident through the work of the LTMS) will require developing a common agenda that embraces a long-term perspective on short-term investment decisions. The Stern Review of the economics of climate change has established the economic case, while some NGOs have long argued the environmental case. It is the social imperative that we must now express to ensure an effective response.

Our national response will need to cut across government departments and involve all sectors of society, and people in their individual and institutional capacities, to participate in averting a massive human tragedy. President Mbeki told parliament: "The South African government understands the urgency of action, and that the costs of doing nothing about climate change far outweigh those of taking concrete measures." It is time for us to specify these measures. This would be aided, at national and international levels, by adopting the 'below 2°' objective.

When about 10 000 people gather for negotiations in Bali in the first two weeks of December, we will see if representatives of the parties to UN

agreements have grasped the social imperatives. If they recognise the social benefits they will adopt a programme, popularly known as the Bali 'Road-Map', to agree by the end of 2009 on a legally binding multilateral system for appropriate action.

At recent climate negotiations in Vienna, some parties objected to references to atmospheric concentrations of 450ppm CO₂ equivalent as being too ambitious. Yet this level would only give us a good probability of limiting warming to something in the range of 2-2.5°C. This is a high level of warming with very large risks, as identified in this year's IPCC Report. Southern African countries' failure to denounce such objections suggests that we are prepared to live with such impacts, which would include declining agricultural productivity and millions of environmental refugees.

In Bali, South Africa and the whole 'Africa Group' should be injecting urgency into the multilateral process and demanding a higher level of ambition. Recently there has been a rash of articles claiming that it is too late to keep below 2°, but this pessimistic opinion assumes an inadequate short-term response. It is

not the verdict of science, which shows that sufficient and affordable effort would give us reasonable odds of achieving this.

At home next year we need to quickly get to grips with our options and the strategic decisions that we need to make within a few years. These decisions should be informed by estimations of the costs and benefits to the majority of South Africans, more than corporate anxiety to sustain current levels of profit. Whether we act deliberately to achieve public and long-term benefits, or default to business-as-usual, will depend to a large extent upon the level of popular demand for climate action now.

"The anticipated impacts of climate change include local and regional conflicts on a scale that is a leading concern to the security establishment, including the Pentagon. Shouldn't we spend more on prevention than we do on all the weaponry, surveillance apparatus and personnel to engage in conflict?"

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Richard Wrthington is the Sustainable Energy and Climate Change project coordinator of Earthlife Africa in Johannesburg.