

Sustainability:

What it means for the environment, the economy and the poor

By Tim Costello, World Vision Australia CEO

**A speech presented at the Monash University Sustainability Conference, Melbourne, Victoria
24 March 2009. Reproduced with kind permission by World Vision Australia**

At World Vision we focus our work on the world's poor. Right now, all the signs are that the environment and the global economy – hardly friends of the poor historically – have both suddenly turned malevolent and potentially fatal. A lot of this turns on sustainability. Industrialisation has over two centuries failed to price in the impacts of climate pollution. Without these signals, much economic development - agriculture, resource exploitation, transport infrastructure, private consumption – has been unsustainable.

The implications are still sinking in. And the belated efforts to change the basis of whole industries and national economies are politically fraught. But it must be done. At World Vision we literally hold a world vision. Corporately, we say: Our vision for every child, life in all its fullness. Our prayer for every heart, the will to make it so.

In practical terms it is a world vision of global sustainability and equitable development, between nations and between generations.

We in Australia have the benefit of being born here, and not as a new child in a large family with barely enough food in a country wracked by instability. In the lottery of latitudes – we are winners. Our children and their children will hold this generation accountable for the decisions we make that will determine their futures. We can see the connections between our lifestyles here in the rich West, and the consequences for the poor – the adverse consequences of our current path, and the positive consequences of a shift to a more sustainable future.

In developing countries, World Vision has existing and new projects promoting sustainable agriculture, water security, renewable energy and energy efficiency, including sustainable carbon market offsets that benefit poor communities. We are preparing to help in mitigating the worst impacts through disaster preparedness, conflict prevention, public health and socio-economic resilience in the face of these major interlocking crises. At the core of the challenge is climate change.

The only news on climate change this year is that it is worse than the bad scenarios predicted in the IPCC's fourth report. In February, one of the lead authors Prof Chris Field gave a presentation on, "What Is New and Surprising since the IPCC Fourth Assessment". He stated that the fourth report underestimated the potential severity of global warming over the next 100 years. "We now have data showing that from 2000 to 2007, greenhouse gas emissions increased far more rapidly than we expected, primarily because developing countries, like China and India, saw a huge upsurge in electric power generation, almost all of it based on coal," Field said.

He concluded: "We now know that, without effective action, climate change is going to be larger and more difficult to deal with than we thought. If you look at the set of things that we can do as a society, taking aggressive action on climate seems like one that has the best possibility of a win-win. It can stimulate the economy, allow us to address critical environmental problems, and insure that we leave a sustainable world for our children and grandchildren. Somehow we have to find a way to kick the process into high gear. We really have very little time."

This sense of urgency has not yet translated into the political sphere and policy formation and implementation. The view seems to hold that scientists are just another lobby group whose interests have to be balanced against other

competing voices such as the coal or aluminium industries.

The funding for transforming the economy is not at the scale necessary to make the substantial changes needed, nor is the proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme sufficiently ambitious to make meaningful reductions in Australia's emissions. Recently in Perth the Greenhouse 2009 conference heard that the global financial crisis was not a reason to hesitate on dealing with climate change. Prof Ross Garnaut said there may be some short-term pause in greenhouse gas emission growth, but that did not mean emissions were falling. Much of the discussion around targets, in the Garnaut Report and in the Green and White Papers, and in the CPRS, has talked about 450 ppm (parts per million) as being the most stringent pathway. But we now know from scientists like NASA's Jim Hansen and others that this is too high, and that paths more like 350 ppm are what we need to ensure a safe climate. Hansen said recently for example: "The stakes, for all life on the planet, surpass those of any previous crisis. The greatest danger is continued ignorance or denial, which could make tragic consequences unavoidable." The public political debate we're currently having is still treating climate change like a moderately serious economic reform – like tariff reform or floating the dollar. We are nowhere close yet to treating it as the global and national emergency that it is. In the last federal budget for example, 39 times more money was allocated for defence over the next five years than for tackling climate change.

We take this issue very seriously. Climate change will affect almost every aspect of World Vision's work in the years to come, both our community development and humanitarian responses.

The potential achievements of the Millennium Development Goals – goals agreed to by many of national governments seeking to halve world poverty by 2015 - are threatened. The OECD estimates that climate change threatens to diminish the impact of aid spending by between 15 and 60 per cent.

The evidence suggests that climate change is putting additional pressure on existing development challenges for the world's most vulnerable communities, through accelerated soil erosion, decreased water availability and quality, increased mortality levels through malnutrition, diarrhoea, tropical diseases, reduced viability of crops, rising sea levels and increased environmental shocks such as floods, droughts and cyclones. This list is easy to rattle off. But let's examine its impact more deeply.

A warmer climate means a greater spread of tropical diseases and greater range for vectors like mosquitoes and parasites. Bacterial and fungal infections spread more rapidly. Food spoils more quickly, and crops are more vulnerable to disease and – through less rainfall - to drought.

Within two decades, more than 250 million people in southern Africa are expected to experience severe water shortages. The melting of Himalayan glaciers means greater flooding in spring and then shortages in the dry season. It means about 1 billion people will be short of water in China, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Tension, and possibly conflict, over water issues becomes inevitable.

Cyclone Nargis last year left 140,000 people dead or missing. It severely affected 2.4 million people, about a third of the country's population. It was highly likely the severity of the cyclone was influenced by climate change. These storms are increasing. With more than 600 million people living in coastal regions less than 10 metres above sea level – mostly in the Asia Pacific region - the devastating impacts of rising sea levels and more intense storms are obvious.

In contrast to the rapid damage from storms, some nations are literally going under water inch by inch. Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Carterets and other Papua New Guinea islands are disappearing with rising tides, creating the first of many environmental refugees. PNG alone has 100,000 people vulnerable to sea level rises. Rising seas mean more fresh water supplies are turned brackish, and some arable land becomes too salty to grow crops. Erosion causes further land loss. Bangladesh's Bhola Island has shrunk by almost half from 6400km² since the 1960s. Forty per cent of Jakarta lies below sea level and its population is increasing. A one metre sea level rise would flood more than

6000km² of India's coast, including parts of Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata.

But there are other opportunities in the global response to climate change which will work for the poor.

There are likely to be significant flows of funds to developing countries; technology transfers so that developing countries benefit from the best energy production and efficiency technologies; and adaptation funds to provide resilience for communities most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The number of natural events we respond to each year is accelerating. And our work is as much about preparedness for disasters as it is in responding to them. After the tsunami, World Vision not only built houses and replaced livelihoods but replanted mangroves for coastal protection and established 12 community broadcast centres with coastal warning systems.

Climate change and global poverty reinforce each other: climate change makes it harder for poor communities to grow crops, access food and water, avoid conflict and shelter themselves. Poverty in turn fuels climate change, as when poor communities cut down forests for fuel and when poor countries use the dirtiest energy sources and most inefficient technologies to develop.

Through our environmental programs, World Vision supplies energy efficient stoves, runs reforestation projects, provides training in natural resource management to ensure sustainable use of water and land and advocates for the protection of existing forests from logging and clearing. In Ethiopia, we have a project at Humbo, which is based on growing trees and crops for fuel and food. This project is being accredited under the United Nations Clean Development Mechanism to deliver carbon credits for trade under the Kyoto protocols. This means additional income could be injected back into community development.

World Vision also believes it is imperative to act as an advocate for the poor at home; for increased aid funding, for leadership on issues like climate change in Australia and other developed nations to assist the creation of a global cooperative agreement at Copenhagen later this year.

Sustainable development for World Vision means empowering the people we help. Integral to our development projects is a discussion with the community and its leaders about their needs, and also about the obligations of the governments and councils who are responsible for basic infrastructure and enforcing people's rights. We aim to give communities a hand up, and then leave them empowered to know what it is they can require of their own leaders.

Sustainability is also important within World Vision Australia, and our head office in Melbourne. Last October on World Environment Day we launched our first Environmental Performance Report. We disclosed our carbon emissions of almost 6,900 tonnes and our commitment to become carbon neutral by 2015. To achieve this we have taken a few steps: reducing our car fleet, cutting hours of lighting and using open plan offices, moving from hand towels to air hand dryers and replacing inefficient appliances. Staff are involved in waste audits, ride to work days and car pooling.

Ultimately, sustainability is the measure of whether our activities are in balance. Right now they are not. The economic crisis revealed the growth and sales of financial products in the US and other developed nations was unsustainable. Our scientists are now consistently telling us the data is at the worst end of the predictions. Our climate has become unsustainable due to western industrialisation, and growth in emerging economies threatens to make it much worse.

The ecosystem – the earth we all share - is a delicate dance of keeping systems in balance. It is time we learn how to dance.