

While we are all affected by climate change, it is now widely recognised that those most affected are the world's poorest people. A consequence of not keeping the temperature rise within 2° C will mean a rise in sea levels, droughts and storms which will have catastrophic effects on millions of people in low-lying and drought-stricken regions of the world.

In March 2009 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams spoke of how respect for the environment is not an optional extra, particularly for Christians. Failure could have disastrous consequences especially for some of the poorest and most vulnerable. He said:

'There is no way of manipulating our environment that is without cost or consequence ... we are inextricably bound up with the destiny of our world'. We must all be aware that ecological questions are 'defined as issues of justice ... both to those who now have no part in decision-making at the global level yet bear the heaviest burdens as a consequence of the irresponsibility of wealthier nations and to those who will succeed us on this planet – our children and grandchildren'.

The Diocese of Winchester is partnered with Anglican dioceses in some of the poorest areas of the world – Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Myanmar (Burma) and Uganda. Mervyn Jones, the Diocesan Partnership Development Officer has provided the following information on the impact of climate change in two of these countries - Myanmar (South East Asia) and Uganda (Africa):

MYANMAR – (Burma)

(a) Cyclones and sea-level rise

1. Myanmar is among the nations at the head of the list of developing countries most likely to suffer heavy loss of life and severe damage, some of it irreparable, to its ecosystems and agriculture resulting from natural disasters either brought about or aggravated by climate change. Climatologists have for some time maintained specifically that destructive cyclones in the region were likely to occur with increased frequency and severity unless nations intensified efforts to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions; and that climate change was responsible for dramatic sea-level rise in low-lying regions such as Myanmar's Irrawaddy Delta.
2. Although not all climatologists and meteorologists agree that it was the effects solely of climate change which rendered Cyclone Nargis so destructive in human and infrastructural terms in the Irrawaddy Delta in May 2008, many experts hold firm to that opinion which they support with scientific evidence.
3. We may never know final death toll figures. Estimates made by disaster relief organisations, charities and other observer organisations, range from 75,000 to well over double that number. But the key facts are that on 2-3 May 2008 a 12ft storm surge and 120mph winds hit with devastating effect hundreds of square miles of the region, destroying 90% of homes and agricultural land in the worst affected areas, and rendering over 1million people homeless across the five Myanmar states which were officially declared a Disaster Zone.

The region, the “rice bowl” of Myanmar and also rich in fish, suffered severe crop loss and flooding/destruction of vital irrigation and sanitation systems, with consequent shortages of food and drinking water and the attendant risk of increasing instances of water-borne diseases.

4. Some of the damage is of a temporary nature, much is not. 500,000 primary school children were affected by the disaster. New schools are needed and new teachers have to be trained, replacing those who died in the cyclone. The disaster has added to the new class of displaced person, the climate change refugee (cf para. 7 below).
5. The response to Cyclone Nargis on the part of international relief agencies was swift, although frustrated by the Myanmar Government’s initial dilatoriness in allowing them access. Donations received by the UK’s Disasters Emergency Committee amounted to £19.5m. The Diocese of Winchester, which has enjoyed formal partnership links with the Church of the Province of Myanmar stretching back to 1876, has itself contributed over £16,000 to help with the post-Nargis rehabilitation and reconstruction programme drawn up in its wake last year by the Primate of Myanmar, Archbishop Stephen. Those contributions represent donations from parishes and individual parishioners across Winchester Diocese.
6. One major concern is that a number of those displaced by Cyclone Nargis have sought to rebuild their homes and communities in the same locations as before, with scant regard for the changed nature of the sea and the perils of continuing to live in low-lying coastal regions without taking adequate precautions.

(b) Deforestation and climate change refugees

7. For some years, unregulated logging and illegal exports of timber by the regime have seriously disturbed the eco-balance in previously richly forested areas in Myanmar, especially those inhabited by Karen communities, many of which are of the Christian faith. The latter have not only seen their native habitat destroyed through deforestation, but have themselves been terrorised by the military and compelled to seek refuge and safe haven in neighbouring Thailand. There they have found some spiritual and material succour from the Anglican Church in Thailand and visiting priests from abroad, including the United Kingdom.
8. The gradual pillage of forest areas has had two major effects: first, levels of carbon dioxide have been pushed up, thus exacerbating the effects of climate change, and, second, the capacity of the top-soil to withstand the force of heavy monsoon rains has been badly compromised, so that much of it is washed away, crops are damaged or totally ruined, and the risk of flooding is greatly increased. In the worst cases, the ecological balance within forest areas has been irreversibly altered, making it virtually impossible for indigenous communities to continue to live there.
9. One of USPG Anglicans in World Mission’s numerous current projects in Myanmar is targeted at community transformation by enabling people to come together in building and sustaining development in hard-hit rural communities, where communal progress has for so long been stifled by local conflict and food scarcity, often exacerbated by the effects of climate change.

UGANDA

(a) Drought vs erratic rains

10. The region of Karamoja (linked with Alton Deanery) in eastern Uganda is one of the least developed in Uganda, with well over three quarters of the indigenous population living at subsistence levels or below, with high levels of illiteracy and half the children of school-age not attending a school.
11. A series of droughts there in recent years has increased food insecurity, giving rise to local and regional conflict over water supplies, and has had a severe impact on farming through animal deaths and rustling. Dust storms have increased the rates of chest and eye infection. More droughts means less rain and less rain means less food. The rainy season itself is not necessarily shortening, but is becoming more erratic and harder to predict with reliability. When the rains do come they are usually shorter but heavier, which is not what farmers want or need. Heavier rains are often damaging, ruining crops and undermining the soil. The result has been a shorter growing season. This has been the experience in Karamoja in particular but also elsewhere in Uganda so that the majority of Ugandans have become more vulnerable to such climate change.
12. The Karamajong have long experience of dealing with droughts and having to move long distances in the search for water. Harsher and longer droughts and a climate that is becoming drier each year have obliged herdsmen to travel even greater distances than before and into neighbouring areas. This has given rise to tribal conflict and Government-imposed restrictions on travel, with consequential hardships and loss of livestock.

(b) Deforestation

13. Throughout Uganda local communities are heavily reliant upon wood, and thus properly regulated logging and tree-planting programmes are vital for the future sustainable development of those communities where formerly uncontrolled deforestation had occurred. The Uganda Government has been exhorting people to plant trees. One initiative has been particularly successful: namely, that introduced by Bishop Jackson Nzerebende, Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of South Rwenzori (linked with Romsey Deanery) whereby each confirmation candidate must plant a tree before confirmation can be granted. The result has been the planting of tens of thousands of new trees in recent years on church and school lands. South Rwenzori Diocese has even established a nursery which supplies the saplings for the tree-planting programme.