

Redefining priorities in the era of global warming

Bryan Pearson charts some of the complexities of the new reality

The politics of progress remain a constantly moving series of goals. Nothing is simple and isolated, because everything is deeply intertwined both culturally and intersectorally and yet we are forever seeking simple solutions whether it be for poverty alleviation, the eradication of a disease, or considering a capacity building programme. A recent visit to Ethiopia and Southern Sudan, followed by an unrelated conference in London, highlighted some of the quandaries and the near impossibility of trying to make firm judgements about rights and wrongs.

I'll take the London conference first. The topic was 'Population, Health and Climate Change' and it brought together an interesting assortment of people ranging from the health ministers of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, the development spokesmen of the UK's three leading political parties, and an array of public health specialists, climatologists, population doomsters, and other development specialists. The conference had the potential to be more dynamic than it was, but it threw up a range of post-Copenhagen climate change issues (with to my relief almost all being of the opinion that there is a problem), an interesting debate on what are the most effective channels for development funding, and the somewhat surreal reemergence of the 'population' issue as the cornerstone of some arguments (I hadn't heard some of the arguments since they went out of fashion maybe 20 years ago). This was all coupled to the further realisation that Africa remains remarkably vulnerable as the world scrambles for long-term food security as concerns rise at global inability to respond to the threat of a warming planet. The ministers stoically called for one-world solutions, skilfully appeased the population lobby, and cleverly handled the inevitable questions over causal effects of religious dogma.

The conference closed inconclusively, but in many ways it was a microcosm of many of the experiences I had seen on a visit to the South of Ethiopia and then Southern Sudan earlier in the year. Anyone who doubts global warming just needs to talk with farmers and pastoralists in Africa. And yet African readers would be amazed at how many sceptics there are in the Northern hemisphere, pulled along by a juggernaut of public relations spin and hubris from people who should know better. Universally the talk is of changing weather patterns,

increasing unpredictability, and society-threatening water shortages. And yet the doubters remain.

But for Africa it is a new reality. As recently as 1980 no one had talked of global warming; the HIV virus existed only in fiction; and population control was a deeply divisive but high-profile activity. As we reach 2010, global warming has moved from nowhere to a position high up the agenda, the HIV virus has similarly emerged to loom large in any health debate... but generally the population issue has slid down the scale of priorities, not because there is no concern, but because studies have shown that as people are pulled out of poverty, so fertility levels drop and the need for multiple children recedes. The big question remains can that poverty trap be defeated quickly enough? Countries like Niger are expected to more than double in numbers before they start reducing. India will be bigger than China before it starts to reduce in size. Will the bulge be too great? What implications for drinking water and food in the meantime? Possibly catastrophic. Truly no-one really knows.



Care and concern: a farmer from Bede-Gosa checks his maize crop.

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The long-term food security issue has caused an astonishing surge of interest from overseas countries coming into Africa with huge deals to lease land. Africa is suddenly in the midst of another land rush. Monitors estimate that almost 50 million hectares of land – twice the size of the United Kingdom – has now been snapped up, and the pace is accelerating.

We visited one farm on the outskirts of Awassa, the capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region. There, a Saudi billionaire businessman, Mohammed al-Amoudi, has taken a 99-year lease of a 1000 hectares of land and has plans to expand this to 500 000 hectares. His representatives point to the employment they are providing to Ethiopians, but are evasive when discussing the potential long-term effects on the water aquifer of their intensive farming methods.

On the highway back to Addis Ababa huge greenhouses have sprung up for the cultivation of cut flowers and roses for the European markets. Kenya earns more from this market than from tourism, but Lake Naivasha has been so depleted by the over-pumping of water to feed the flowers, that many growers have upped sticks and headed for the alluvial agricultural areas of southern Ethiopia. External perceptions of Ethiopia are that it is a dry and arid country suffering from regular droughts. But that is the East of the country. The centre and West provide the second wettest terrain in Africa, with strings of lakes and highly alluvial soil.

A few miles South of Awassa we visited a community water project which is part of a broader programme being funded by help from JICA (the Japanese International Cooperation Agency), which is involved in a range of groundwater capacity building schemes along with vocational industrial skills and management programmes. It is a major coffee-growing area and here, working with the local water board officials, communities pull together to provide themselves with clean water.

The initial capital cost of a well can range upwards from 100 000 Ethiopian Birr (just over US\$7k). A borehole can cost around a million. But once built, the local water board officials collect EB20 birr (a US\$1.4) a month from each household to pay for servicing and repair of the pump. The officials also keep an eye on use (the gate to the small compound housing the well is only unlocked for 2 hours in the morning, and the same period in the evening) and also monitor local groundwater levels, as well as the aquifers in the area. The process is strong, but the Water Board can only 'control' their local population.

The big agricultural or flower farms are managed from Addis Ababa, not the regional governments. Regulation is weak and a permit to extract water (of whatever amount) costs just EB87 Birr (US\$6). In only very few cases are water meters installed to charge against actual use. The clear but polite acknowledgement from local officials was that whilst they were trying to do their best to manage their region's resources, unless regulation from the centre was improved, they are wasting their time. They also appealed for better technologies. Currently, for instance, they pointed to the huge waste of water in coffee processing which led to a single use of water and no recycling. 'Our rainfall is declining. Our

hydrology is challenging,' said one of the officials. Conclusion: community and local water board officials are doing remarkably well, but are being undermined by big business and central government politics which appear to be on a completely different wavelength, with the competing short-term interests of the foreign exchange benefits of exporting 100 tonnes of agricultural produce to Saudi Arabia every week, sitting uneasily against the interests of long-term community and land sustainability.

An hour up the main road from Awassa back to Addis Ababa, and after passing huge greenhouse poly-tunnels – one stretched for almost 3 kilometres – we visited the Bede-Gosa Water Use Cooperative in Dugda district. Established in 2004 with 19 farmers (16 male, 3 female) on 4.75 hectares of land it has retained the same membership but now extended to 10 hectares of land. JICA helped them start up with two pumps, an office and a store, plus a cooperative legal entity and a bank account. Today the farmers have EB50 000 in the bank, have invested in a number of additional pumps, four of them have now constructed their own houses (from income) in the nearby town of Meki, three have built homes along the roadside in Geberel, and one has even constructed a hotel. From eking a subsistence living growing maize on rain-fed fields and herding cattle, they now grow vegetables, tomato, onion, pepper, and integrated maize and sell it through the local Meki Batu Vegetable and Fruits Producers Union (which represents cooperatives from three adjacent districts). Clearly the impact on their lives, has been significant. I asked the Bede-Gosa Chairman, Balcha Bonsa what the impact had been? 'We have had great change, not least because we are now properly sending our children to school; we have been able to extend the farms ourselves with new pumps; we have good residences, and we are fulfilling good items in the houses, like fridge and bed.' Compare this to the lot of those employed by the hour or day picking fruits and vegetables on the industrial and flower growing farms a few miles down the road.

Prioritising development direction has never been simple, but much as the HIV virus took over much of the health debate in the 1990s, so global warming issues and sustainability issues look likely to dominate the 2010s. The 'right' way forward is going to remain a constantly changing goal.

And the giving of aid is just as complicated (and maybe ought to be the subject of an entirely separate article). Most of the G8 countries now give the bulk of their money directly to governments as budgetary support. In some countries it works well, whilst in others there have been big problems. In recent times both Uganda and Zambia's health funding support has been switched off while corruption has had to be checked. But the Japanese, uniquely, feel it is far better to provide project and technical assistance to empower people directly rather than wait for the drip feed down from government initiatives. There is much to applaud in this approach.

It is often said of the human form that 'growing up is hard to do.' The development debate is often far more complex.