



Article Reprint
September 2007 - Alliance Magazine

Standing or falling together
By Andrew Milner

'Every company, every community, every organization, every household and every citizen,' says Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, should take part in programmes designed to reduce consumption of oil, gas and coal and to rein in emissions causing global warming. The sentiment may be a commendable one, but we have seen elsewhere in this issue that the developed world has not yet taken it to heart sufficiently. Is the same true of the developing world? If it is, what are the obstacles to more vigorous action and what can foundations do to encourage it? Alliance asked four people involved in environmental issues in developing countries around the world about the state of things in their country and what they thought needed to change.



What's happening now?

'Virtually nothing!' is currently being done about climate change in the Arab region, according to Najib Saab, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Al-Bia Wal-Tanmia (Environment & Development) (as an index of this, his magazine is the only one in the region dealing with environmental issues). 'The oil exporters [the rich Arab countries of the Gulf] have a "conspiracy theory" about the issue of climate change,' he says. 'They were made to believe that it has been created to hamper their socio-economic development, by imposing trade restrictions on their main source of income, oil.' The poor Arab countries of the Levant and North Africa, on the other hand, 'still view climate change as a luxury they cannot afford.' Throughout the region, he says, energy efficiency measures are almost non-existent.

According to Vasant Saberwal of the Ford Foundation in India, very little is happening at government level in India either. 'There are plenty of stories in the press about retreating glaciers, increased incidence and intensity of rainfall events and drought, and so on, but there is basically no sign of government interest in the subject or the implications of climate change.'

In Nigeria, according to Nnimmo Bassey of Environmental Rights Action, the main problem is resistance from big corporations, in particular oil companies working in the Niger Delta. Communities are trying to make these companies extinguish their gas flares, a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. 'Currently,' he says, 'it is estimated that about 2.5 billion cubic feet of associated gas is flared daily in the Niger Delta region releasing a cocktail of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, methane sulphur oxides and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.' The government has set 2008 as a 'flares out' target, but Shell has said that this is not feasible.

'Local communities and civil society groups such as Environmental Rights Action,' he says, 'are working to set up Community Climate Crisis Committees to strategically prepare for introduction of survival and mitigation measures.' In addition, the Nigerian government and local communities have tree-planting exercises to check desert encroachment and at the same time serve as carbon sinks.

We have already heard the Chinese premier's public pronouncement on the importance of the issue. Wen Bo, Global Green Grants Fund China Coordinator, reports that the country announced a National Climate Change Program in June, which outlined steps to meet a previously announced goal of improving overall energy efficiency in 2010 by 20 per cent over the 2005 level. Wen Jiabao has also urged local governments to curb excessive growth in energy-intensive and polluting industries by measures such as keeping the credit supply in check, while inefficient facilities in thermal power, steel, alumina, iron alloy and cement sectors have been ordered to be shut.

How effective implementation of these recommendations and directives has been is another matter. There is often what Vasant Saberwal calls 'the classic disjunction between policy and practice'. He cites

an instance of it in India which, he says, has the largest number of CDM (clean development mechanism) projects in operation, and in at least some of these sites there are commitments to planting large numbers of trees, with little to show for it. This disjunction, he believes, 'represents a core part of the problem of such solutions to global warming: how do you enforce compliance following payment for environmental services?'

Developing countries on the receiving end ...

Our respondents were largely in agreement that developing countries will suffer most from the consequences of global warming - and, points out Wen Bo, 'they are also ill prepared for the coming ecological crisis.'

In Nigeria, the coastal belt is low-lying and parts have a tendency to subsidence. 'Experts estimate that a cumulative sea-level rise of one metre would result in lands lying within 100 kilometres of the coastline going under water,' says Nnimmo Bassey. The Arab region, too, 'will face immense problems in the form of submersion of more than 18,000 kilometres of inhabited coastal areas in addition to all the reclaimed land and artificial islands being built in the Arabian Gulf.'

In Nigeria, there are two other serious problems: 'northern Nigeria is being threatened by the downward march of the Sahara Desert,' says Bassey, while 'the threat of erosion of livelihoods through crop failures and land pressures in a fragile economy portends a grave disaster'.

... and contributing to a global solution?

So much for the problems they face. On the positive side, what can developing nations do to help find global solutions?

Najib Saab feels that 'if governments in the Arab Region offer incentives to their population to build solar systems for water heating and electricity generation and support wind energy, that will be a huge opportunity to build the culture of using sustainable/renewable energy.' He mentions the German model whereby the government supports soft loans for individuals to invest in solar panels and wind energy towers with guaranteed purchase of the power generated and cost recovery in less than ten years.

Nnimmo Bassey has a slightly grander vision: 'Developing nations have the unique opportunity of showing the world that another path to development is possible. This can be done by pioneering a radical shift from the fossil fuel driven path which has brought us all to the precipice.'

Among other things, he advocates a creative interpretation of the measures currently in use to combat climate change and gives as an example 'the initiative from Ecuador where the government has said they would want to receive carbon credits for keeping the crude oil in the ground in the pristine Yanusi Park' (see p12). To him this seems like 'a practical solution that would both preserve biodiversity and other resources and reduce the supply of fossil fuel, the biggest culprit in this equation.'

Putting aside self-interest

In view of what we have heard about the current state of affairs, what is the likelihood of developing country governments introducing, and peoples embracing, measures to check climate change? Won't developing countries argue, for instance, that it's all very well for the developed world to talk about curbing practices that have been crucial to their own economic and industrial development, now that they have entered a post-industrial phase of development, but why shouldn't developing countries be at liberty to pursue similar means to prosperity? For Nnimmo Bassey, this is a legitimate question: 'The emergence of strong growth in developing nations directly raises the issues of equity and justice. I do not see this as just a matter of global warming but one of basic survival in both divides of the world.'

The arguments over mitigation costs, etc, are real, but they belie the real quest to pursue chosen paths of doing things.'

Beyond the question of what is fair in this respect, there is a more urgent consideration: 'Nations must overcome parochial self-interest,' he says, 'and realize that we have just one world.'

Wen Bo feels that 'developing countries would potentially be willing to adjust their development models provided that they are offered technical and financial assistance.' The real barrier, he argues, is political will. "Having a right to develop" is an excuse to ignite nationalistic feeling and avoid being creative in finding an alternative development path.'

Will the poorest lose out?

At a deeper level, Vasant Saberwal is worried that the solutions being suggested might produce a situation where the interests of India's elite predominate at the expense of those of the very poor. 'In the past, conserving the environment has often meant converting grasslands into forest lands within which no grazing is permitted. The problem is that the landless in India tend to survive by grazing small herds of animals on common lands.' He goes on: 'Common lands are being identified across the country as wastelands and handed over to private agencies for the production of biofuels. It's seen as a win-win situation, given that these lands are "unproductive". Planting jatropha will not only increase vegetation cover, the argument is that it will also lead to improved revenues for residents through carbon credits and fuel production. The only problem is that these are lands that are currently used by the very poor, and so are not "unproductive wastelands" to start with.'

For Nnimmo Bassey, growth in parts of the developing world and the continued and increasing demand in developed countries for energy to fuel their lifestyles throws up the danger of a resources race. 'The world,' he argues, 'is already in a serious crisis. And this will only get deeper unless there is a paradigm shift in our modes of production and relations.'

Overcoming the obstacles

Ultimately, feels Najib Saab, 'developing countries will seriously join the endeavours to fight global warming only when there is a global consensus on the issue within developed countries. This should be accompanied by a practical implementation mechanism.'

He cites the example of ozone depletion, where the implementation of the Montreal Protocol on eliminating ozone-depleting substances 'would not have been possible without four factors: scientific consensus, which is now also there for climate change; political consensus on clear targets; developing alternative substances which could perform the function of those phased out, and making them available in the market; and a multilateral fund, which helped developing countries cover the cost of phasing out ozone-depleting substances and shifting to safe alternatives. A similar mechanism should be devised for global warming.'

On an optimistic note, he feels that this consensus is coming, with a change of attitude among the US government and people: 'The next US administration cannot afford to ignore the impact that [Al Gore's] advocacy campaign on global warming has made, leading to deep change in American perception of the issue, among the public, industries and decision makers alike. In spite of all their reservations, China and India will also join a global consensus, after negotiating suitable trading terms.'

Wen Bo's approach to the matter is straightforward: 'We need to empower people and promote people's power around the world. People will know what is best for themselves and for their own environments; and in most cases, they know better than their own governments.'

Showing foundations the 'opportunities to engage'

What can foundations do here? Wen Bo's view is that foundations and individual donors should support civil society development in countries like China: 'building a rich and mature global civil society would help educate and pressure governments to act more rationally and responsibly.' They should also support 'various kinds of individual projects and efforts in tackling climate change'.

Given the levels of interest that the World Bank and other bilaterals have in developing CDM and other solutions to global warming, Vasant Saberwal's opinion is that 'smaller private foundations could probably play a key role in monitoring the impacts of these interventions through commissioned studies'. In regard to his own foundation, Ford, he admits that 'the Delhi office is not doing much on climate change' but he sees opportunities. 'There are very large potential community-level earnings from trade in carbon credits or from other forms of payment for environmental services,' he says, and while this could prove a double-edged sword, in that it will attract the potentially predatory attention of the elite, 'it could also generate opportunities for building coalitions/consensus across social divisions. I think the Foundation should support some pilots to begin to get a sense of either process.'

In Nigeria, says Nnimmo Bassey, foundations are currently active in working with civil society organizations to increase the level of awareness and discourse on climate change. In addition to this, he feels, 'foundations should support actions that build knowledge on the challenges, that promote alternative production systems and of course that encourage popular grassroots actions to build adaptation and mitigation mechanisms.' He adds: 'Alliance's primary audience is grantmaking foundations - many of which, I'm sure, feel the problems of climate change are too big and overwhelming for them to tackle. Our aim is to show them the opportunities to engage.'

Alliance would like to thank the following for contributing to this article:
Nnimmo Bassey Executive Director, Environmental Rights Action, Nigeria
Wen Bo Global Greengrants Fund China Coordinator
Najib Saab Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, Al-Bia Wal-Tanmia, Lebanon
Vasant Saberwal Program Officer, Ford Foundation, India