



**SUBMISSION TO THE PUBLIC HEARINGS**

**on the**

**POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, LEGAL,**

**GENDER and SOCIAL IMPACTS**

**of CLIMATE CHANGE**

**17 – 18 NOVEMBER 2009**

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference welcomes the opportunity to make a brief presentation to these public hearings on this most urgent and important topic.
2. We particularly commend Parliament for taking the initiative to hold hearings that involve this wide range of committees. Such a 'multi-disciplinary' approach is of crucial importance if we are to succeed in tackling the problem of climate change. Indeed, part of the reason why we find ourselves facing this growing crisis is that, all over the world, there has been a failure to adopt a holistic approach. Climate change – and its solutions – is not the responsibility *only* of the industrialised countries; or *only* of the fossil fuel companies; or *only* of international institutions. All consumers, all governments, business, labour and civil society must be aware of their roles in the growth of the problem and in helping to solve it. This gathering of eleven parliamentary committees is a very impressive sign of such an awareness in our legislature.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S POSITION

3. Last month, Bishops and church leaders from all over our continent met in Rome for a special gathering – or Synod – on questions of pressing importance for Africa. At the end of the Synod a number of 'propositions' were announced which will guide the Church's activities in the coming years. The proposition concerning the environment reads as follows:

Our Christian faith teaches that God the Creator made all things good (cf. Gn 1); and gave the earth to us humans to cultivate and take care of as stewards (cf. Gn 2:15). We observe that many human beings, at all levels, have continued to abuse nature and destroy God's beautiful world by exploitation of natural resources beyond what is sustainable and useful. There is an irresponsible degradation and senseless destruction of the earth, which is "our mother".

In complicity with those who exercise political and economic leadership in Africa, some businesses, governments and multinational and transnational companies engage in business that pollute the environment, destroy flora and fauna, thus causing unprecedented erosion and desertification of large areas of arable land. All of these threaten the survival of humankind and the entire eco-system. This has raised among scientists and stakeholders an awareness of the deleterious effects of climate change, global warming, and natural calamities (like earthquakes, sea-quakes and their consequences like tsunami).

To make the earth habitable beyond the present generation and to guarantee sustainable and responsible care of the earth, we call upon the particular Churches to:

- promote environmental education and awareness;
- persuade their local and national governments to adopt policies and binding legal regulations for the protection of the environment and promote alternative and renewable sources of energy; and
- encourage all to plant trees and treat nature and its resources, respecting the common good and the integrity of nature, with transparency and respect for human dignity.

4. The Church locates respect for the environment, and therefore our duty to act against environmental degradation and threats such as climate change, under the heading of ‘respect for the common good and human dignity’. (This is a concept, of course, that enjoys the highest prominence in our own South African Constitution.) The title of these hearings likewise refers to the ‘political, economic, legal, gender and social’ consequences of climate change. In all of these approaches we find a common thread: that climate change and other forms of environmental degradation ultimately impact negatively on the common good of the human family, and ultimately on human dignity.

## **ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE**

5. We wish to use our short submission to focus on the positive aspects of the challenge posed by climate change. This is not to deny at all the seriousness of the problem, or to gloss over the alarming predictions of what will happen if we do not act quickly and concertedly to address it. But we should not overlook the fact that the reality of climate change brings with it some very significant opportunities.

## **ENERGY GENERATION**

6. Even if fossil fuels were not harmful to the environment, the world would run out of them sooner or later; and we would then have to find other sources of energy for transport, industry, communications, and so on. The fact that we have begun to realize that our massive use of oil

and coal is harming the world should therefore spur us on to do more quickly what we will one day have to do anyway.

South Africa is particularly well-placed to take advantage of alternative and sustainable energy sources. Large parts of our country receive sunshine almost throughout the year, and many of our coastal areas have virtually constant wind. Some of these areas – for example, in the Northern Cape – are sparsely populated, and the construction of large-scale solar energy and wind energy plants in these areas would have relatively little environmental impact.

The question is whether government is doing enough to promote and encourage our scientists, entrepreneurs, parastatals and financiers to take advantage of the free energy that is available to us? Of the total budget allocated to energy generation – including the massive capital cost of building more coal and/or nuclear power stations – what percentage is going to research and development of solar and wind energy? One or two ‘pilot projects’ or ‘experimental installations’ is not enough – it is time to get serious about alternative energy.

As to the question of alternative energy being too expensive, those who make this argument tend to forget the enormous environmental expenses that we are going to have to face if we carry on burning coal and oil. One only has to think of the cost of protecting our coastal cities and towns from the effects of rising sea-levels to realise this. And we should also take into account the cost in human lives and well-being if climate change starts to impact seriously on our farming sector and our agricultural exports. If we really factor in the true costs of relying on coal and oil, then suddenly alternative energy doesn’t seem so expensive.

South Africa has an industrial and technological infrastructure that allows us – more than just about any other developing country – to benefit from the available alternative energy sources. That, combined with our abundant sunshine and wind, means we should be aiming to become a world leader in the development and use of alternative energy.

## **EFFICIENT ENERGY USE**

7. It is very encouraging to see so many solar water heaters installed on the roofs of the N2 Gateway houses in Langa, and on some of the RDP houses that have been built over the last

15 years. But these are still the exception, rather than the rule. Again we need to ask, is government doing enough to promote domestic solar heating and similar energy-efficient practices?

There are various simple steps that can be taken almost immediately:

A) Legislation should be introduced to require all new houses and residential units to be equipped with solar water heaters. This would add comparatively little to the building cost, and the installation would pay for itself in electricity savings in a few years.

B) Incentives should be provided to encourage existing home-owners to install solar heating. The national treasury should give serious consideration to allowing a once-off tax-deduction for the cost (or a part of the cost) of converting to solar heating. This could be administered in much the same way as medical expense and retirement annuity deductions currently.

C) The present Eskom subsidy for solar water heaters is too low and applies to only a few installation companies. The subsidy needs to be extended both in the amount available and the number of contractors who qualify. This subsidy should focus on home-owners who do not pay income tax and who therefore would not qualify for a tax-deduction.

D) Regular campaigns should be conducted to encourage people to switch to fluorescent lights, gas cookers, and other energy-saving devices. These campaigns should always include financial incentives – whatever is spent by government in cutting down demand for electricity will inevitably be recouped in the massive savings that will result if we do not continually have to build new power stations.

## **POSITIVE SPIN-OFFS**

8. One of the main reasons why alternative energy remains under-utilized is that it is initially expensive. The construction costs of large-scale solar and wind energy-generation facilities are high, but this is partly because they are undertaken on an experimental and ‘once-off’ basis. If the country as a whole was committed to these forms of energy on a massive scale, the unit costs of each solar and wind generator would come down significantly.

The same applies to domestic solar water heating. The economies of scale that would flow from a concerted, properly subsidized installation scheme would ensure that the unit cost for each home-owner would reduce substantially.

Just as important, a switch to alternative energy would create a huge number of jobs in the short and medium terms. It can easily be imagined how many more people would be needed in the plumbing, electrical and building industries, not to mention the multiplier effect in those sectors, such as steel and engineering, that would supply the actual product. Many of the new jobs would be at the semi-skilled or even unskilled level, where employment is desperately needed. Furthermore, there would be many opportunities for training and skills transfer.

## **COPENHAGEN**

9. From time to time there are reports that developing countries will not commit themselves to emission reduction targets, and other steps to counter climate change, unless the industrialised nations take the lead. It is correctly noted that the rich countries of the North have been historically – and to a large extent still are – by far the largest producers of greenhouse gases. Accordingly, they should be doing most to reduce emissions, and not expect the developing world to hold back on its own economic growth.

This attitude is understandable, but it risks some very serious consequences. Many studies show that the developing world, and Africa in particular, will be far worse affected than the richer countries. African countries also have far less wealth and resources at their disposal to pay for measures to combat the effects of climate change.

It would be short-sighted and self-defeating for us to refuse to commit to targets simply because the rich countries were too selfish to do so. Even though the United States, for example, shamefully refused to join the Kyoto Protocol, many developing countries – including South Africa – did so. There is no reason why, when we attend the Copenhagen Conference in December, we should wait for the rich countries to set the pace.

## CONCLUSION

10. The request by Eskom for annual 45% tariff increases over the next few years places our dilemma in sharp focus. Almost all of this extra money will be spent on new coal-fired and/or nuclear power stations, and those power-stations will only add to the problem of climate change. In the end, we will have electricity that is two or three times more expensive than it is now, and just as dirty.

Respect for the common good of humanity demands that we take urgent steps to move away from the harmful practices that have created the climate change problem, and instead begin to take proper advantage of the abundance of free and clean energy that nature has provided for us.

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For further information please contact

Mike Pothier or Janine Ogle

Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office

[info@cplo.org.za](mailto:info@cplo.org.za) or [janineogle@cplo.org.za](mailto:janineogle@cplo.org.za)