

The Threat of Climate Change Demands a New Understanding of Development

Ruth Conway

Sustainable Development?

Ever since the Club of Rome report on *Limits to Growth* in the 1970s, followed by the Brundtland Report in 1987 which defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', and the first Earth Summit on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992, there has been a recognition that **'development' and 'environment' are inextricably linked**. Even so, organisations addressing development and social justice issues have tended to regard concern for the environment as an add-on for those with time and money, while environmental organisations have been slow to show interest in the problems facing the human community. So the question **'What is development?'** has not been examined in an integrated way, allowing the term 'sustainable development' to be used without questioning whether this is a contradiction in terms.

The idea has persisted that development is linked primarily to economic growth and participation in the global market – a market that is linked to a consumer culture that keeps up the demand for more products. Furthermore, the production of more and more products has resulted in the increasing exploitation of the earth's natural resources, including the use of fossil fuels, with little regard for the limits of those resources or the damage being caused to the finely balanced eco-systems that sustain life.

A New Understanding of Development Would Recognise:

Everything is interdependent, not only across the human community, but across the entire earth community. Development motivated by the hubris and greed characteristic of the rich players in the global market undermines the mutuality which is essential in maintaining the web of life. **The economy is a sub-set of ecology**: if the ecological systems that replenish the earth's resources and keep the dynamic systems in equilibrium are damaged, the basis of the economy collapses. The concentration on (indeed the idolising of) a money economy and the production of material goods has created **an individualistic consumer culture falsely equated with development**. A new understanding would be more concerned with the quality of relationships and the building of community. There is **a spiritual depth to the crisis**. See Alistair McIntosh, *Hell and High Water - Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition* (Birlinn 2008).

Among other things, the crisis requires a profound transformation of formal – and non-formal – education. In *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy: Skills for a Changing World* (ed. Arran Stribbe) (Green Books, 2009), 'whole person learning' is one of the strategies advocated. This strategy 'with its emphasis on the development of whole human beings able to think critically, respond

compassionately and act ethically within a learning society that engages and integrates people's hearts, minds, hands and spirits, indicates most strongly that faith perspectives have a crucial contribution to make. Are there Christians ready to take up this challenge and engage in the processes of educational transformation?' (from my review in *Green Christian*, 69, Summer 2010, p.21).

The most far-reaching consequence of our pursuit of materialistic and money-based development is the threat of catastrophic climate change. Operation Noah came into being as a Christian response to this threat. Its vision, as stated on the website www.operationnoah.org, is to be 'informed by the science of climate change, motivated by our faith to care for creation and driven by the hope that our society can be transformed and enriched through radical change in lifestyles and patterns of consumption'. Our annual meeting this year, the day before Pentecost (22 May 2010, 11.00-17.00, Friends' House near Euston), was on the theme *By Cloud and Fire: Spiritual Journeys to Climate Safety*, inviting participants to help chart a path through the spiritual and political wilderness and equip themselves to take action on climate change.

The Assembly of the European Christian Environmental Network in Prague, 9-13 June 2010, addressed similar issues with the theme *Our Daily Bread: Living in a Time of Climate Change*. The keynote address was given by Alistair McIntosh, mentioned above. There is some account of it on the Network's website (www.ecen.org), including three articles by Alistair McIntosh.

Ruth Conway is the author of *Choices at the Heart of Technology: a Christian Perspective* (Trinity Press 1999), a member of the leadership team of the European Christian Environmental Network and a member of the board of Operation Noah.