

Climate change and the Muslim world

Climate change is increasingly seen as the biggest challenge facing humanity. We will all be affected by it, but it is many of the poorest countries in the world who will be affected most. Muslim majority countries such as Bangladesh, Senegal, Mauritania and Pakistan will face nothing short of disaster as the planet heats up as a result of greenhouse gas emissions from human activity.

Bangladesh

Scientists predict that climate change is set to inundate Bangladesh with floods and erosion for four reasons:

- ✘ Over the course of this century, Bangladesh could be receiving 10 to 20 per cent more rainfall.
- ✘ Melting glaciers in the Himalayas will result in higher water run-off.
- ✘ Rising sea levels will result in flooding and slow the run-off of water from the land.
- ✘ Higher sea temperatures are likely to make cyclones worse, with higher wind speeds and heavier rain.

A rise in sea level of 100cm would reduce Bangladesh's land area by 20 per cent, forcing 15 million people to migrate. However, the numbers affected would be much greater than that. 46 million people in Bangladesh already live in flood endangered areas; with a 100cm rise in sea level this would increase to 118 million.

Definitions

Greenhouse gases: Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) is the most common greenhouse gas, but others such as Methane and Nitrous Oxide also have an important warming effect.

Carbon Offsetting: Where business or individuals 'offset' their emissions by funding renewable energy or reforestation projects. Offsetting can often be an excuse not to reduce the UK's emissions, and many projects have been criticised for their negative effects on local people or dubious methods of accounting for emissions reductions. This has been especially true for tree-planting projects.

Adaptation: Making changes to cope with the impacts of climate change, for example building sea defences or diversifying crops.



Flooded Street in Naogaon City, Bangladesh

Floods and erosion are part of life in Bangladesh, and are vital for the renewal of land, but they are becoming more frequent and more intense. Floods in 2004 left around 800 people dead and up to 30 million homeless. Lessons were suspended in 18,000 primary schools, and around 80 per cent of crops were destroyed in affected areas.

Rising sea water is also starting to contaminate groundwater, making vital wells useless. These kinds of impacts are not limited to Bangladesh, but are affecting low-lying areas of countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines too.

Mauritania and Senegal

Whilst some countries are already suffering from too much water, others are drying up. A UN report illustrates that rainfall in the western Sahel (Mauritania and Senegal) is projected to decline in both summer and winter, probably by more than 20 per cent. This will lead to large scale crop failures. In Senegal, which will see the worst losses in rainfall, yields from agriculture could be reduced by up to 50 per cent by 2020.

This will not only affect food security, but also export earnings. Groundnuts are a major source of income for Senegal, but as Thierry Lebel of Senegal's Institute for Research and Development points out "*in Niger, groundnut production has almost disappeared, and the same change is underway in Senegal.*" Already weak economies could be further undermined.

Central Asia

Central Asian countries will also be affected. Average summer rainfall in parts of Pakistan, Iran and central Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan could



decline by more than 20 per cent over the course of the century.

In addition to the dramatic decrease in rainfall, some Central Asian states such as Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are also heavily dependent on melt-water from glaciers for their freshwater supply. In Kazakhstan, the country's glaciers have shrunk by more than 25 per cent in the last 50 years.

Whilst cutting water supplies in the longer term, a more immediate effect of melting glaciers is flash floods. In April 2006 for instance, a flood caused a landslide which swept away the water pipeline for Roghun District in Tajikistan, depriving 20,000 people of a water supply for three days.

Global inequality

Much of the global south will see similar impacts, intensifying poverty as well as resulting in direct deaths from famine and extreme weather events. Yet it is largely the rich world that is responsible for the carbon emissions which are causing this disaster.

The average UK citizen is responsible for 9.6 tonnes of CO₂ emissions in a year, yet the average Bangladeshi is responsible for only 0.3 tonnes. Whilst this is an average figure which masks inequalities in emissions between rich and poor within countries, it gives a picture of the huge global inequality in responsibility for climate.

As citizens of one of the world's richest countries, our prosperity is based on decades of overusing fossil fuels. Not only is there a massive inequality in emissions between rich and poor in the world, and not only will the disaster of climate change hit the poorest far harder, but it's our very prosperity which is directly driving that disaster. That's why climate change is not just a development and environmental issue, but an urgent matter of global justice.

As Dr Atik Rahman, of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies says: *"We have made no contribution [to climate change], but suffer the highest impact - that makes it a huge case of moral inequality against which the global citizenry, the global nation states, must take action. If not we'll be calling it climatic genocide."*

Time for climate justice

There is increasing public awareness about climate change, but global greenhouse gas emissions are still growing. In the UK, despite fine words from the

The UK and some Muslim majority countries compared: CO₂ emissions per person.

Country	Percentage Muslim	CO ₂ emissions per person (tonnes)
Bangladesh	83%	0.27
Senegal	94%	0.41
Pakistan	97%	0.67
Tajikistan	90%	0.99
Mauritania	99%	1.09
Uzbekistan	88%	4.56
Iran	98%	5.95
UK	3%	9.62

government our CO₂ emissions have actually risen by 6 per cent since Labour came to power in 1997.

We can all take personal action to reduce our emissions. Take a train instead of a flight where possible, reuse and recycle waste, switch to a renewable electricity supplier and cycle or walk instead of taking the car. However, we need to keep global warming below the critical 2°C above pre-industrial levels which is when scientists think runaway climate change kicks in. To do this we need major changes to our economy and society.

It is vital that the government takes action, and the first step is to write emissions reductions into law. The government published a draft climate change bill in spring 2007 which is a good step forward, but it doesn't go far enough. The latest science suggests we need to cut CO₂ emissions by more than 80 per cent by 2050, not 60 per cent as the bill stipulates. Annual targets are also needed within this, to ensure the reductions happen.

It is also important that the UK's share of emissions from international aviation are included in the bill. Despite the fact that flying is the source of greenhouse gases which is expanding the fastest, the government currently ignores these emissions. We need policies that will stop the growth in aviation, such as appropriate environmental taxes and an end to airport expansion.

We can stop runaway climate change and prevent the needless deaths, of both Muslims and non-Muslims, that it will cause. But to do so, not only do we need to take responsibility ourselves, we need the government to take responsibility for the climate disaster that Britain is part of causing in impoverished parts of the world. We must act quickly to build a sustainable society in order to achieve climate justice.

Find out more

The **World Development Movement (WDM)** campaigns to tackle the root causes of poverty. Joining movements around the world, we win justice for the world's poorest people. WDM, 66 Offley Road, London SW9 0LS 020 7820 4900 www.wdm.org.uk

The **London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE)** is the UK's first local Islamic environmental group. Activities include climate campaigning, educational talks and ethically orientated food and social events. 0845 456 3960 www.lineonweb.org.uk