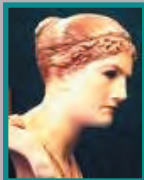


Blaming the victims?

This is written before the Copenhagen climate meeting. As I write, President Obama has announced that no binding decisions will be made at Copenhagen, which reduces the likelihood that the meeting will be another brazen display of hypocrisy. Nonetheless, face-saving platitudes are likely to be have been uttered and more lavish promises made to help developing countries switch to cleaner technology. How many of you remember the Clean Development Mechanism, introduced at the Kyoto climate meeting in 1997? Almost 13 years later, it remains severely underfunded. Look back farther to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the year I wrote a *BODHI Times* editorial about the Demographic Trap: the likelihood that rapid population growth would ensnare some countries in abject poverty and worse, as indeed occurred in Rwanda two years later (see website).

At Rio, generous promises were made to provide “new and additional” finance to help Third World countries switch to more environmentally friendly technologies. Those promises, like so many others, were broken long ago. Seventeen years after Rio, time is running out. I feel like a hybrid of a broken record (or damaged CD) and a male Cassandra (see box).

Recently, the prominent and prolific British writer and activist George Monbiot wrote an essay in *the Guardian*, a major UK newspaper, called “Stop blaming the poor. It’s the wally yachters who are burning the planet”. Monbiot implied that people concerned with population are blaming the very poor for climate change (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cif-green/2009/sep/28/population-growth-super-rich>).



Cassandra, the beautiful princess of Troy, was promised the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo, in exchange for her love. She later rejected Apollo, who then cursed her so that no one would believe her prophecies. To this day, most people think a person labelled a Cassandra delivers false warnings, especially of gloom. In fact, Cassandra’s predictions were correct.

Monbiot, like many on the Left, has never shown much regard for or understanding of the compelling human rights and development-based cases to promote family planning in low-income countries. In his essay, Monbiot uses assertion and vilification rather than evidence. He starts by describing a statement issued by the eminent scientist and author James Lovelock, as “ignorant and irrational”. The statement that caused such offence was made recently by Lovelock when he became a patron of the UK-based Optimum Population Trust (OPT). Lovelock wrote: “Those who fail to see that population growth and climate change are two sides of the same coin are either ignorant or hiding from the truth. These two huge environmental problems are inseparable and to discuss one while ignoring the other is irrational.” Clearly Monbiot disagrees with this, and he reacts to being so grouped.

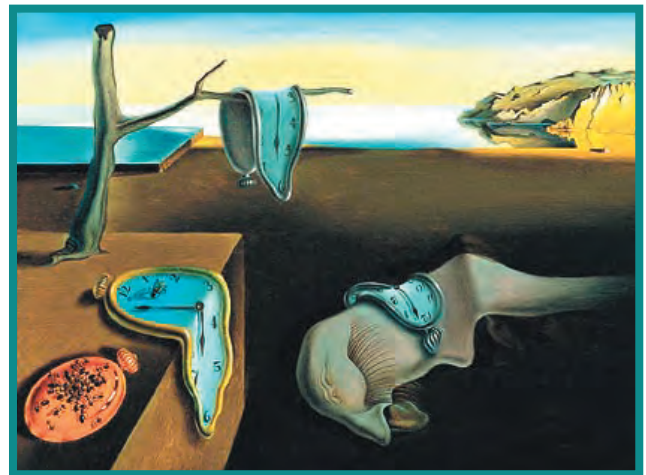
Rather than explain his objections to Lovelock’s statement, Monbiot seems to jump to the conclusion

that Lovelock and perhaps the OPT are attributing a substantial fraction of the responsibility for climate change to the poorest of the global population, which has the highest birth rate—people such as famine-plagued peasants in Ethiopia. It is very important to point out that there is no credible argument in the scientific literature to support the gist of this assertion. That a writer of Monbiot’s visibility can make this claim is disturbing. Mud can stick. If such a victim-blaming perception were to spread, it would hurt the small sector of the environmental movement with the courage to raise the sensitive and contentious issue of population.

It is true that the 2007 OPT briefing paper “A Population-Based Climate Strategy” is not explicit about the obvious fact that the climatic footprint of the extremely poor (the fourth “claste”) is very low, compared to that of the first and second clastes (see *BODHI Times No 14*). But the briefing paper makes no such claim, and such an interpretation would be highly imaginative. Monbiot also describes the OPT as “one of dozens of campaigns and charities whose sole purpose is to discourage people from breeding in the name of saving the biosphere”. This is gratuitous. The OPT statement is clear that population limitation, from a climate-causing perspective, is most important in “developed nations such as the UK because of their higher consumption levels”. Indeed, the high population growth rates of Australia and the US—still the world’s leading per capita greenhouse gas emitters—show the importance of the OPT case.

I interpreted Lovelock’s full statement (<http://www.optimumpopulation.org/releases/opt.release26Aug09.htm>) differently than did Monbiot. As I see it, the world has three groups. The first group (the first and second clastes) is very successful at consumption. Most are group-centric, selfish, short-sighted and blind to the warnings of science. They also drive policies which ignore or at least discount the poor. Group 2 (the bulk of the world’s population, the third claste) are not yet high consumers, though they are increasing their footprint. Many live in India and China, countries in which a lot of the coal burned is used to produce goods for Group 1.

Members of Group 2 are gradually making a substantial contribution to climate change, but at a far lower per-person rate than the first group. Group 2’s population growth rate is falling rapidly. Then there is a third group. Group 3 seriously underconsume, still have high fertility and are very vulnerable to the harmful effects of climate change.



The persistence of memory, Salvador Dali

I am unaware of any evidence that environmental or population activists, including the OPT, link this group with *causing* climate change.

All groups live on the same planet. Group 1 mostly think Group 3 is responsible for its own plight, or is a resource to be plundered for their benefit. Indifference to the fertility dynamics of Group 3 is part of Group 1’s world view. In that way, overconsumption and overpopulation are two apples from the same tree. However, the OPT statement does not make this distinction sufficiently clear, leaving itself vulnerable to the interpretation of people like Monbiot.

There is another way in which climate change is relevant to population and population growth. In November, the Bulletin of the World Health Organisation published a paper to which I contributed concerning the harmful impact of rapid population growth in very poor countries, in the context of climate change (<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/87/11/08-062562.pdf>). For some time, developing countries have been encouraged to submit National [climate change] Adaptation Programmes of Action to the Global Environmental Facility. Two of my co-authors, based in London, analysed the first 40 reports, received until April, 2009. Of these, 37 said rapid population growth exacerbated attempts at adaptation to climate change.

Our paper stresses that neither the population size or growth of the poor is in any way responsible for present levels of climate change; instead we argue that poor societies with high population growth rates are headed for more trouble and that climate change will exacerbate these problems.

Hilary Clinton is said to have raised the issue of India’s population with the Indian Minister for Environment, Jairam Ramesh (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/aug/28/india-population-climate-change>). Australia, too, is now on track for 35 million people by 2050, up 60% from its current number. Prime Minister Rudd has hinted that it should receive a special deal because of its growth. If true, such a claim would be quite consistent with recent Australian policies, which pretend to be high-minded and internationalist but in fact are myopic and deeply selfish. Australia can undoubtedly support a higher population, but the world should not have to shoulder the larger ecological footprint this will generate. This is inevitable if Australia continues its current climate change and consumption policies of Promise Much, Achieve Little.