

Sustainable Development and our Christian faith

Our World church Team is involved in all sorts of ways of helping and supporting our brothers and sisters around the world. Why do we do what we do?

Why should we care for the earth?

I first became aware of the inequalities and unfairness in the world during the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s. I had a strong sense of compassion for those affected, but wanted to understand how and why there was such inequality and injustice in the World. I wanted to know what was behind the photos of starving children

Jim Wallace, an American campaigner used a powerful image to show why we should think beyond the emotive pictures of starving children. There was a village next to a large river in a country somewhere in the world. One day the villagers saw a person floating down the river. They waded out and pulled them ashore, and found the person to still be alive. They fed and looked after them and nursed them back to health. The following week they saw another person floating down the river, again they waded out and rescued the person and took them under their wing. This kept on happening more and more frequently. At what point do the villagers decide to go upstream to find out WHY all these people are ending up in the river to find out if there something that can be done to stop it happening. In the same way, we need to look beyond the images of starving children and understand the root causes of poverty, famine and injustice to find out what can be done.

What is the current situation?

We have one earth, with a finite amount of resources; the food it can produce, raw materials (metals and minerals) to make things, water and fuel. At the same time the population of the earth is rapidly increasing, from 1.5 billion in 1850, to 5.4 billion in 1995. Today it is just over 7.2 billion and is predicted to be between 8.3 and 10.9 billion or even more by 2050 (UN figures).

If the world population continues to use the earth's resources at the same rate that we do at the moment, we will need 2 earths to support us by 2030.

Some more staggering statistics: if all the world's population shared the same living standards that we do in the UK, this would use the resources equivalent to 2 or 3 planets; if we all lived at the same standard as Bangladesh, we would we only need part of Asia and

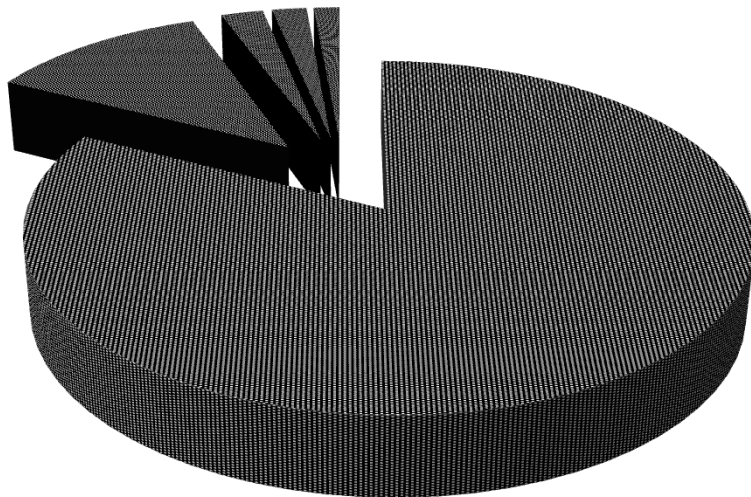
Africa; if all the world's population shared the same living standards as America, we would need 4.1 earths, and if we all shared the same living standards as the United Arab Emirates, we would need 5.4 earths.

It's a good job we don't all consume at the same rate as the United Arab Emirates; but, as developing countries become more prosperous, their consumption is rising, think of China and India with their vast populations.

So not only is the world population is rising, and so is its consumption and it is clear our planet cannot support this population increase if we continue to use the Earth's resources in the way we are at the moment.

Another big problem is that the way we use Earth's resources is unequal. Oxfam figures show that the 85 richest people (that is individuals) own the same wealth as 3.5 billion of the poorest people, that's half the world population and almost half of the World's wealth is owned by 1% of the population.

If we were to divide the population of the world into 5 equal parts of people and we were to share a cake, representing the wealth of the world, between them, the richest 1/5 of the world would get 83% of the cake, the second richest group 12%, the middle group 2.3%, and the poorest groups get tiny slices!



This extreme imbalance of wealth means that there are hundreds of millions of people who cannot make a living wage from their talents and hard work. This economic inequality makes it more difficult to tackle poverty and inequality and makes other inequalities such as access to education and health care, gender equality and working conditions.

I believe it is our responsibility as Christians to respond to this. 'The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it (Ps 24) we are stewards of our World (Ps 8) and as Paul writes, (Philippians 4, 12) we need to learn the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want and being content, not with what we need, but with what we have (Hebrews 13.5).

When I have been fortunate enough to visit Africa I am struck by how much those with the least, are, in some ways, more content than us. I am also struck by just how much they rely on God to provide, because they have to. It is very humbling.

How well do we care for the world?

This earth started as a lump of gases and elements thrown out from the beginnings of the universe in the big bang. How life started, and evolved in such a complex way is amazing. It has become a massive self-regulating entity. It is controlled by so many different systems; winds, water, ocean currents and plant and animal life, which all interact and completely depend on each other. When small changes happen to these systems, the earth has an amazing ability to regulate itself and incorporate changes and rebalance all the different complex systems. But this ability to adapt can only go so far; if part of one of the systems is pushed too far, it cannot adapt.

These are different aspects of the complex environment of Earth. Each of these factors are part of systems that have 'safe limits' ; if they are pushed beyond these safe limits, the systems of the earth cannot compensate, and that therefore causes irreversible change to the earth.



People have so much effect on Earth, that we are pushing these factors beyond safe limits.

Climate change is happening. It is caused by increased levels of carbon dioxide, that we as human beings have caused by burning fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas). The carbon dioxide in oil and gas was locked away in plants and animals that died millions of years ago, and has all been put back in the atmosphere since the industrial revolution. The increased levels of carbon dioxide affect the earth's ability to regulate its temperature properly. It is in red because this is we have reached and are now exceeding the safe limit.

Access to **water** is becoming increasingly difficult for many parts of the World, it is being used faster than ground water is replenished, we are using more than our fair share for this generation.

Minerals: Our consumer society is demanding more and more gadgets and 'stuff' that all need metals, minerals and plastics. There is not an inexhaustible supply of the raw materials to make them. At the same time we discard our unwanted stuff and gadgets without reusing and recycling them.

Pollution: Human beings have poor record of polluting the earth, from factories, from transport and from power stations. In the west we are getting a bit better, rules and

regulations are helping. But in many parts of the world pollution still affects air quality with effects on human health and wildlife.

Biodiversity is a measure of how many different plants and animals there are. It is staggering, but human activity is very rapidly destroying this. Rainforests are still disappearing at an alarming rate in our need for more land for food. Why does this matter? Plants and animals are part of all the systems that the Earth depends on for the health of the planet; they affect climate change and represent future resources for generations to come. Rainforests can be looked upon as the lungs of the earth.

How we use our **land** is important. Soil becomes degraded if the land is not properly cared for, leading to loss of land to grow food, soil erosion and landslides.

Nitrogen and Phosphorous are used widely as fertilisers, and they have adverse effects on natural habitats and wildlife.

The **oceans are becoming more acidic**, caused by increased carbon dioxide levels. This is already affecting coral reefs. Oceans are an important part of the systems that keep the earth healthy.

If these factors are pushed too far, they trigger ecological and social disasters – and these always affect the poorest first.

It is our responsibility as Christians to care for our brothers and sisters across the world. All people should have access to basic human rights such as:

- Water and sanitation: 13% of people have no access to clean drinking water and 39% no basic sanitation.
- Food: 13% of the world's population is undernourished.
- Income: 21% of the world live on < \$1.25 a day.
- Education: 11% of 15 to 24years olds are illiterate.
- Resilience: People need to be able to cope with, or adapt to, disasters.
- Voice: People need to have a voice and be heard.
- Jobs: People have a right to work that is fairly paid with decent working conditions. Too many of our brothers and sisters are little more than slave labour.
- Equality: everyone should have access to these rights, regardless of their gender, faith or race.
- Health: 30% of people have no access to essential health care.

Addressing these issues is made harder and harder because environmental effects, like climate change, water, resource use and pollution affect the poorest most.

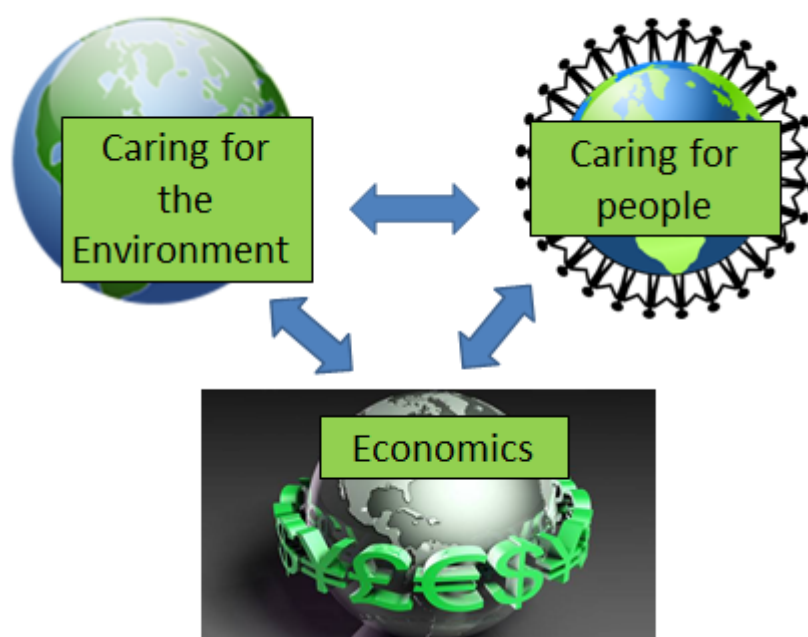
So how can we respond? What is Sustainable Development?

The roots of poverty are complex, but it comes down HOW we share the resources of the Earth. 'Sustainable Development' is a bit of a buzzword that is often misused. At its heart sustainable development in the true sense of the meaning is about sharing the resources of the world so that the needs of this generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs ('Our Common Future' (Bruntland)). In other words, sharing the resources of the earth equally within our generation, in such a way as to make sure we are leaving enough for our children, grandchildren and their descendants.

So, Sustainable Development is about how we use the resources of the earth, how well we care for the environment and how we share with the poorest.

Caring for the environment is inextricably linked with caring for the people of the world. Environmental issues make the social issues worse and in turn, the poorest people, trapped in poverty often have no option but to degrade the environment further, e.g. by causing deforestation. These issues in turn are inextricably linked with the economic and political systems and big business of the West. Fluctuating food and energy prices, financial crises, unfair trading systems, large corporations; these are all linked, and in turn make poverty harder to address.

Sustainable Development addresses all these issues: environmental, social and economic.



process cause pollution and how were the raw materials obtained, does it use recycled materials?

- Use products carefully – buy things that will last and can be repaired.

What is our role in all of this? How can what we do make a difference?

Going back to the analogy of people floating down the river, when we stop to find out why there is poverty and hunger and inequality, our lifestyles are partly responsible. So to address poverty and hunger and inequality, it is not just about giving money for famine relief, it is about looking at every aspect of what we do, at home, at work and at Church, what we buy, what we waste and how we live.

Here are some ideas that we can do as individuals and in our everyday lives what we should do as a Church:

- Cut gas and electricity use:
 - insulate your house better (lots of advice available, it can be free /grants available),
 - turn the thermostat down, put on a jumper, have shorter showers, use low energy light bulbs, switch lights OFF, fit draught excluders! How efficient is your boiler? Look at **www.energysavingtrust.org** for ideas and advice.
- Reduce, reuse, recycle: use less, buy second hand, share infrequently used items with friends and neighbours, take unwanted items to second hand shops, recycle as much as possible. Make do and mend.
- Eat less red meat!!
- Try not to use disposable items.
- Dispose of waste properly, especially paints, solvents, batteries, old electrical equipment etc.
- Try to use your car less, car share, walk, use your bike, take the bus or train.
- Try to fly less.
- Share your ideas with others.
- Buy Fairtrade goods.
- Buy products that are certified as sustainably sourced, e.g. forest stewardship, rainforest alliance.
- Support organisations that promote sustainable development.
- Take part in campaigns/lobbying through organisations such as Christian Aid, Tear Fund and A Rocha.

I am no better than anyone else in the footprint I make on this planet; we all need to try and encourage each other to make our footprint as small as possible and tread as lightly as we can on the amazing Earth that God has given us stewardship over.

This is what the **World Church Team** is all about; the different issues we seek to address are all part of Sustainable Development.