

Dealing with THE GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGE



How can we attain the level of international cooperation, particularly between the developed and developing world, which will enable us to meet the challenge of climate change?

Robert Glasser Australia, Secretary-General, CARE International

CARE is a federation of 12 members from the global North and global South. We have 70 offices in developing countries, and those offices are in the field, far from capital cities. Our several thousand staff are predominantly nationals of the country in which they work. So we hear what issues are affecting poor people around the world. The last speaker talked of the 'ticking time bomb' of abrupt climate change. For poor people around the world, the ticking time bomb doesn't require a runaway greenhouse gas effect because for them even the small changes that we are already experiencing threaten their very survival.

Those of us in wealthy countries are much better suited to dealing with emergencies arising from climate variability. If there is a storm it is generally not more than an inconvenience. Maybe instead of taking the train we take the car because we don't want to get wet. We have radio and TV, and can take action when the weather report tells us a storm is coming. We have strongly built homes, and insurance if our home is damaged. We have a vibrant police force and fire department to help maintain order, keep roads clear, and help people who are in strife. If there is a drought we have the resources to purchase and transport water.

But for the one billion who are living in absolute poverty, less than a dollar a day, these are not options. These people are enormously resilient and resourceful. If you visit villages in poor communities you will see amazing things, people growing food for themselves and to sell, selling firewood, creating handicrafts. In our terms, they are diversifying their portfolio to manage the risks of being poor. They also have an extended family and community that they rely on heavily in emergencies. That is the only insurance they have against disaster.

Nevertheless even minor shocks can be a crisis for people living on the edge. There is a fascinating study, 'Voices of the Poor', which surveys poor people around the world. It makes clear that, for the poor, the biggest threat to survival is not lack of a job or inadequate food. It is the incapacitation through illness of a family member.

Because that sets in motion a series of crises which undermine their ability to survive. The family member is not able to work, medicines must be purchased, and much more.

In recent years we have seen an increase in severe weather patterns, and 80% of those affected by severe storms and droughts are in developing countries. The reports we receive from our country offices suggests that farmers in South Africa, Ethiopia, Somalia are noticing changing rain patterns and experiencing more prolonged droughts. Droughts that happened every eight years are now happening almost every year and are persisting for longer. This is the challenge with which global warming confronts us. Poor people, who are the least responsible for the problem, are going to suffer the greatest consequences. This has implications for security, for migration and much else. Just to highlight one small change that could be absolutely devastating and is suggested by the modelling: if the monsoonal weather patterns shifts ever so slightly it would affect the livelihood of a billion people in Asia. That is clearly possible if the climate system jumps into a different pattern. This would have a devastating impact on poor people. The most disturbing aspect of this situation is that more people don't realize that this is the challenge of our lifetime.

Robert Glasser

Robert Glasser was appointed Secretary-General of CARE International in 2007. He was CARE Australia's Chief Executive Officer since 2003. Before joining CARE, Mr Glasser worked on international energy, environmental and peace and conflict issues for a number of organizations, including the US Department of Energy, Cornell University's Peace Studies Program and London's International Institute for Strategic Studies. He is the author of numerous papers and co-editor of "Climate Change and Energy Policy" (1991) for the American Institute of Physics. In 1995, he moved to Canberra to join the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), where he became Assistant Director General.