

BARBARA STOCKING: Statement accompanying the speech at the MDG High Level Event, United Nations, 25 September 2008.

Everywhere, we see environmental problems worsening: poisoned and over-fished seas and lakes, deforestation and soil erosion, the loss of wetlands and watersheds. Sustainable development seems further and further away.

But I want to talk primarily about climate change. I am not at all apologetic about talking about climate change at this meeting on the Millennium Development Goals. Climate change is a challenge that threatens to undo whatever progress has been made - and make ending poverty an impossible dream.

Think about food security. In the last year it is estimated that another 75 million people have become undernourished, in part as a result of climate change – whether from droughts and floods, or the unthought through rush to first generation biofuels helping drive up food prices while not helping cut carbon emissions.

Climate change is not something in the future, it is happening now. Seasons are going crazy, floods follow droughts, and mountain glaciers are melting, threatening future water supplies. The Earth's ecosystems, already stretched, are at breaking point.

Martina, a woman in Northern Uganda, says: "In the past there was enough rain. But now things are different. The rains have disappeared. And when it does rain, it sometimes causes bad floods, which then destroy our crops".

And Sahena, a Bangladeshi woman, says the monsoon rains are getting heavier and more unpredictable.

Poor people are affected earliest and worst - especially poor women like Martina and Sahena who are most of the world's farmers, and whose lives are bound up with the need to collect natural resources like water and firewood.

Yet as temperatures continue to climb in coming decades, the impacts will dwarf what we have seen so far. If we allow global temperatures to surpass two degrees Celsius, climate impacts will threaten not only development prospects, but also the very survival of human societies.

The most urgent challenge that I bring to you today from civil society organisations across the world is to reverse greenhouse gas emissions.

If we do that we still face enormous environment challenges to achieve sustainable development. But, if we do not avert dangerous climate change there is no chance at all.

We must follow the science, not business-as-usual economic convenience. That dictates that emissions must peak and start to fall no later than 2015. We need to achieve a just and effective climate deal in Copenhagen next year.

But whatever happens, climate will continue to change due to the warming already in the Earth's systems. So helping people to adapt, people like Martina and Sahena, is crucial.

They are helping themselves – Martina's community is planting trees to replace ones cut down for fuel.

Sahena, president of her local women's committee, is encouraging everyone to raise the foundations of their homes above flood level and prepare for disasters.

As Sahena says: "We are not born to suffer, we are born to fight".

But they need more help, and those who have historically produced the emissions must be the ones to pay.

Climate change and the MDGs are intricately linked. People who are fit and healthy, with an education and enough food and clean water are more resilient to cope with shocks.

They don't need to live in shacks that can come down in cyclones, or tidal waves, they can get insurance for their crops. They have more control over their lives.

And that applies especially to women, disadvantaged from birth because of their sex. As Sahena says: "Just imagine what more I could have done if I had an education".

Climate change makes achieving the MDGs much harder, because of its impacts on ecosystems, food, water, health, and on women's rights and livelihoods. At the same time, achieving the MDGs is crucial to empower people to resist those impacts.

Therefore my message from civil society to rich countries is: stop harming - by cutting emissions; start helping - by keeping your promises to fund development at 0.7% of GDP.

And deliver the additional money needed on top of that so that people can adapt to climate change - not as aid, but as compensation for causing global warming.

And share your new clean energy technologies with people in the developing world.

As civil society we will do our part in many different ways but you as governments bear primary responsibility - and you can be sure that we, alongside poor people across the world, will be holding you to account.

Ends

Note: Barbara Stocking is Chief Executive of Oxfam GB, a member of Oxfam International.

The stories of Martina and Sahena are from Oxfam's Sisters on the Planet campaign. See www.oxfam.org.uk/sisters

Oxfam International is calling for a human rights-centred approach to climate change policy-making. See Climate Wrongs and Human Rights at <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/bp117-climate-wrongs-human-rights-0809>

In line with this, Oxfam is calling on rich countries to: Lead now in cutting global emissions to keep global warming well below 2 degrees C; provide the finance needed for international adaptation; provide the finance needed for low-carbon technologies in developing countries; and halt their biofuel policies which are undermining poor people's right to food.

Oxfam is calling on developing countries to: Focus their adaptation strategies on the most vulnerable people; and have ownership in managing international adaptation funds and be accountable to poor communities for spending.

Oxfam is urging companies to: Call on governments to act with far greater urgency in cutting global emissions; not lobby to block effective regulation; take significant steps to cut their own global emissions; ensure that their mitigation or adaptation projects do not undermine people's rights; build communities' climate resilience through their own supply-chain operations.