

# living simply

by Meenakshi Raman



Responses to the international climate change crisis — caused by unsustainable over-consumption of fossil fuels, particularly in the North — are at present gravely inadequate. If this is indeed the defining issue of this century, then nothing short of fundamental change is needed.

Poor, vulnerable communities in developing countries — the least responsible for climate change — are being hit the hardest by its impacts and by the false solutions being promoted to tackle it. This is an issue of development, human rights and justice. Those countries with the greatest responsibility for historical and continuing greenhouse gas emissions have sufficient wealth to act and must do so. The inequitable consumption of resources by the North and its exploitation of resources from the South have led to ecological debt that must be repaid.

Science tells that, if the most dangerous impacts are to be avoided, average global temperature increase must be kept well below two degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels. This implies that the long-term concentration of greenhouse gas emissions cannot exceed 450 parts per million carbon dioxide equivalent — though, even at this level, there will be countries, communities and species that will suffer catastrophic effects.

The science also suggests that global greenhouse gas output needs to be at least halved by the middle of the century, compared with 1990 levels. Hence, there has to be agreement on the principles of 'burden-sharing' between the North and South. The deeper the cuts to be made by developed countries, the less the burden on developing ones.

It is clearly insufficient, for example, for the developed nations to reduce their emissions by between 60 and 80 per cent as part of a global 50 per cent cut by 2050. Let us look, as the Third World Network has done, what that would mean in practice for the South. In 1990 the world produced 38.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide; cutting this by half would bring it down to 19.3 billion. The North's original share of this was just under half at 18.4 billion tonnes, and a 70 per cent cut would reduce it to 5.5 billion. That would leave the developing countries with a target of 13.8 billion, 33.3 per cent down on their 1990 level of 20.4 billion tonnes. But since their population is due to more than double over that period their per capita emissions would have to be cut by 65 per cent.

There should be open debate as to whether such a cut is fair, and whether it should be undertaken. Given the North's historical responsibility — and the quality of life it has attained at the expense of the atmosphere and the South's 'environmental space' — it is indeed its responsibility to address the implications of what appears to be an unfair burden on developing countries.

The heart of the matter is whether, and how, we can find a sustainable development pathway for developing countries that leads not only to stabilizing greenhouse gas emissions but to improving living standards and alleviating poverty within an ecological framework — and enables new policies for agriculture, industry, trade and finance.

This is an enormous development challenge and one that should not be underestimated by predictions that spending between 1 and to 3 per cent of GNP would be enough to take care of the problem. Much more work and action is needed to show how developing countries can go into a simultaneously low carbon and sustainable development pathway

The following measures are necessary elements for such a way forward.

Developed countries must urgently undertake a major leap in dramatically cutting their emissions, so as to give much of the developing world the environmental space to undertake sustainable development to address the basic needs of their people and overcome poverty. Thus, the burden-sharing arrangement must be frontally addressed.

Lifestyle changes are needed, especially in the North and among the elite of the South. Not enough attention is being given to this fundamental issue, though the outcomes of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit emphasized changes in consumption patterns and production systems. We cannot afford to maintain the position that the lifestyles of the rich are not up for negotiation when so much is at stake. Even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report states that changes in lifestyle and behaviour patterns can reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The changes must emphasize resource conservation and contribute to a low carbon economy that is both equitable and sustainable. We have to live simply so others can simply live.

The developing countries must be rapidly enabled and supported with the finance and technology needed to undertake a low carbon pathway. There must be a massive increase in public funds and resources from the North to the South — rather than, as is currently advocated, mere reliance on the private sector and the carbon markets for the additional finance needed to meet the costs of mitigation, adaptation and reconstruction. Revenue for these funds can be raised by redirecting military spending, cancelling debts, contributing 'cap and auction' winnings, and raising levies and taxes.

Barriers, such as intellectual property rules, to transferring and deploying climate friendly technologies to the developing world must be removed or relaxed. Technological options being discussed by some, such as nuclear energy, genetically modified trees (for allegedly improving species), agrofuels, large hydropower plants and carbon capture and storage, are false solutions as they pose grave risks to the environment and health and safety, and threaten a variety of social impacts.

More emphasis and priority should be given to energy efficiency and renewable energy, especially solar and wind power. Decentralized forms of energy production, in the hands especially of the rural poor in developing countries, are a major imperative.

Adaptation efforts should benefit the poor and protect ecosystems, livelihoods and human security. Community-based projects provide the best opportunity to ensure that these are culturally, technically and socially appropriate and increase resilience to the impacts of climate change.

Forest protection programmes must uphold community rights, and the land rights of indigenous and other local peoples, prohibiting any action that seeks to exclude indigenous and forest-dependent communities from 'conservation' areas. Failure to prohibit this is an endorsement of environmental racism and threatens sophisticated cultural conservation practices.

Crucially, there must be coherence, from a climate perspective, in the policies of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Some of their policies have promoted climate vulnerability and undermined resilience in developing countries. Mercantilist policies that undermine sustainable development are being pursued through international financial institutions with aid conditionalities, through the WTO, and through Free Trade Agreements designed to open up developing country economies.

How can developing countries give priority to integrating climate change into national policies when international measures exacerbate poverty and inequity, including through displacing small farms and firms and giving access over natural resources to powerful foreign corporations? This must be reversed, in a process that will also require coherence in developed country policies.

As grassroots-based NGOs in developing countries, we will continue to do all we can to enhance their commitment to give top priority to climate change. But this cannot materialize unless international policies complement national efforts. If all the above issues are addressed well, more sympathetic policies and behaviour can be expected from the South.