

Interview – Gonzalo Oviedo

August 2008

How bad are the impacts of climate change today, and what solutions do we have left?

We are approaching collapse. And the problem is it's too late to stop it. The only thing we can realistically do is to slam on the breaks to minimize the disaster. We are now at a point where there is no turning back. That's why adapting to the inevitable impacts of climate change is becoming more and more important, above all in regions of the world where people are highly vulnerable to these changes. We can still reduce some of the impacts by reducing our green house gas emissions, for example. The problem is that the impacts are already being felt in many parts of the world.

Could bio-fuels be part of the solution to climate change?

Bio-fuels represent a complex issue today that cannot be boiled down to a simple question of good or bad. I believe there's a bit of both. Unfortunately we're seeing more and more instances where bio-fuels are creating more negative impacts than solutions. But that's not to say that everything to do with bio-fuels is bad. Exploitation that does not compete with food production, notably of oil-based plants in India and Africa, has proved very successful. There's a lot of investigation going on, for example on fuel production based on algae and micro-organisms, but unfortunately the bulk of the work is still at the experimental phase.

There are various areas of bio-fuel production, including sugar cane, that do not necessarily pose either an environmental or a social risk. There are cases, however, of industrial bio-fuel production not only causing environmental and social problems, but what's more without proof of being helpful in reducing the effects of climate change. That said, it would be mistaken to condemn bio-fuels and to become hysterical over their deleterious side effects. I feel this is a totally inappropriate reaction that would sadly have, or that is sadly having, a negative impact on further investigations into the improvement of bio-fuels and their potential for energy production.

It is crucial, though, to develop standards and criteria that will make bio-fuel production compatible with the social and environmental conditions required for sustainable development.

What role can women play in combating climate change?

There are various reasons why special attention needs to be given to the role of women with regards to climate change. On one hand, women in developed countries, particularly, have a significant influence on family decisions - more so than we often realize. This influence isn't so much a question of the choices of fuels used for cooking, for example, but more often what is cooked. There is a growing awareness that the cost, not only financial but also ecological, of transporting goods from the four corners of the planet to put on our plates far outstrips those of production. Therefore, what cooking habits a family adopts can have a very important effect on this particular issue. And this holds true for various other aspects of family economics.

On the other hand, in the populations most vulnerable to climate change, first of all you have to take into account the fact that women are particularly vulnerable and that they bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change, especially in cases of natural disasters or extreme climatic events. Women are the ones who have to look after the children, the sick, the elderly, and are at the same time the ones who get the least support during crises. But if you turn this around, and give women the support they need to face up to stressful situations, they turn into veritable pillars that shore up the social fabric and give people the resilience they need to live with the impacts of

climate change. Women are best placed to make sure that the rest of the family, and by extension the rest of the community, is in good condition. For example in the case of natural disasters such as floods, it is a proven fact that by far most people die, not at the time of the event, but after, due to diseases, a lack of food etc. It is in such key moments that women have a fundamental role in assuring a community's survival and recovery. And yet during political discussions on climate change today, whether over emissions reduction, mitigation or adaptation, we're seeing too little understanding of this role women play.

How are marginalized cultures coping with climate change and what might we learn from them?

Many cultures that have long lived in arid places have developed, for example, sophisticated systems of water management that have worked well for ages. These are excellent adaptations to the kinds of climatic fluctuations affecting extreme and complicated regions. They are also adaptations we could learn from to bring better support to such places, and to manage the complicated issue of water shortages, which is resulting from climate change in various places. Another interesting example is the management of Andean wetlands by the Ayamara of the South America, which has been very important in preserving pastures and productivity for food security. This system is now in danger, not only due to climate change, but also due to wrong-headed development strategies in certain places, and it will disappear if we don't soon bring it appropriate support.

Why is the world not giving such cultures and their practices more thought? Because they are perceived as bringing no contribution to economic or human development. In fact the opposite is true. These cultures have countless skills and vast experience that we could include and adapt in finding solutions to climate change.

What kind of world do you want to live in?

I want to live in a world filled with diversity – of nature, of cultures, of people, and also of the choices that we can make for all humanity to live in dignity and for the planet to survive and see a greater future.