

# Commentary

## The consequence of consequences

*In dealing with Climate Change, adaptation as well as mitigation is needed in order to protect human activity and develop social resilience*

Our Executive Forum meeting last month looked at the issue of climate change. The record of that meeting has already been circulated to members. Our meeting was followed in quick succession by a second meeting on a similar subject hosted this time by the Asian Institute of Management as part of its globalization lecture series.

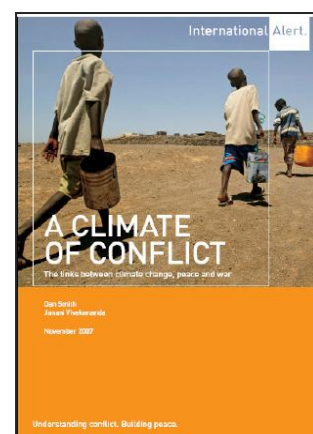
That meeting gave an entirely different—but equally valid—perspective, to the issues confronting humankind.

Whereas our own meeting took the traditional path and looked at climate change from the standpoint of mitigation efforts needed to slow, and eventually reverse, the rate at which anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are changing climate patterns, the AIM meeting took a rather more radical approach and looked at adaptive patterns of behaviour needed now in order to address change already upon us. It was an interesting contrast and in the interest of providing a holistic and balanced perspective to the issue, needs to be reported.

The A.I.M. meeting, which was sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Institute, took as its own reference point the report “A climate of conflict—the links between climate change, peace and war” produced by London-based think-tank, International Alert (IA). IA is an independent peace-building organization that works to lay the foundations of lasting peace and security in communities affected by violent conflict. According to its website the organization works “...in over 20 countries and territories around the world, both directly with people affected by violent conflict as well as at government, EU and UN levels to shape both policy and practice in building sustainable peace.”

The proposition examined was that climate change was already upon us and that the physical consequences of these changes have started to unfold. The consequences will be both physical—in terms of more extreme weather patterns, melting glaciers and shorter growing seasons, and social—in that the added uncertainty will heighten the risks of conflict and political instability, both within communities as between the “haves” and “have nots” and internationally between those responsible for climate change and those suffering the consequences. Change will come in the form of both sudden shocks as well as slow and incremental shifts but one thing is certain, the past cannot be used to predict the future.

Hardest hit will be people living in poverty in under-developed and unstable states and those under poor governance. Extreme weather events will cause drought, floods, reduce land fertility, create drastic changes to the crop output, rising sea levels, famine, displacement of communities, disease



*The IA report is available from the AIM Policy Center and was provided to all who attended our recent Mining Consultative Group meeting.*

and pestilence. And these are just the start. Climate change has the potential to become a “threat multiplier” if the consequences are not addressed through appropriate policy and attitudinal shifts.

Thus alongside mitigation strategies (which are now the focus of growing political attention) we also need adaptive strategies to allow us to survive as cohesive societies. Adaptation has so far failed to attract serious advocacy, yet the need is the more urgent one. The key risks to be addressed through adaptation include (a) increased political instability, (b) economic weakness, (c) food insecurity and (d) demographic shifts.

This proposition is of particular importance to the Philippines as it is one of 46 countries—home to 2.7 billion people—considered to be most at risk. A total of twenty provinces in the Philippines are vulnerable to a one-metre rise in sea level and these are in those regions with both the highest poverty incidence and greatest food insecurity. Naga City in the province of Camarines Sur would be among the first to suffer and would all but disappear with a one-metre rise in sea-level.

The IA report puts forward the proposition that climate change needs to be treated as an opportunity and become the occasion for enhanced interational, national and local cooperation. It has to engage governments, the private sector and community organizations within the process. Although adaptation is starting to feature on the international agenda, it is mitigation that takes the lion’s share of the headlines and the focus of funding and policy initiatives. A more balanced approach is necessary.

Two central motives should drive the international debate on adaptation: the need to maintain international peace and security as well as support for sustainable development. With cataclysmic events within the bounds of possibility, demographic shifts may be sudden and dramatic—remember the Vietnamese boat people of the 1970s? That sudden demograhic shift took more than a decade to address.

But while there is a need to direct international attention towards the adaptation aspects of climate change, the community is the vital level for action to take hold since at the end of the day; adaptation and conflict resolution has to take place within the communities themselves. Elsewhere it is called “stakeholder engagement.” In this case, most communities are not aware that they are yet stakeholders.

International companies operating in at-risk countries have both an interest and a responsibility in safeguarding their investments by working together with governments and communities on climate adaptation. Business practices need to be climate sensitive. This is not a problem to be addressed in

**While on the subject...**

The Economist recently reported the results of a study based on analyzing five million expense claims filed by some 100,000 British employees between 2005 and 2007.

The study estimates that the carbon dioxide generated by the average expense-claiming employee from business travel (and not including commuting) during the year is the equivalent of boiling a jug of water 105,413 times.

To offset the carbon dioxide generated, it would require each employee to plant and grow to maturity (a process that in temperate climates takes on average about 99 years) six trees. For the U.K. alone this amounts to 22.5 million additional trees needed per year.

the future but needs to be integrated into corporate planning as of now—both as a contingency and as a further aspect of community engagement.

The key take-away from this meeting was that there is a real and immediate risk that climate change will compound the propensity for violent conflict and that the Philippines is especially vulnerable. It is not poverty alone that drives the risk but the uncertainty and the perceived risk of future insecurity that amplifies current problems.

While the Philippines contributes only one half of one percent to global pollution and is not among those causing global climate change, it is certainly a country that will be among those suffering the most devastating consequences as a result of it.

Any programme—government or private sector—focused on adaptation has to be a bottom-up, rather than a top-down, approach starting at the community level; because community buy-in is essential to the process. A study of conflict dynamics shows this lesson very clearly. Now in dealing with conflict management and resolution, an additional variable needs to be factored into the equation or the risk of ultimate failure is heightened.

As an under-developed country, the Philippines faces an especially high risk of violent conflict created by climate change interacting with and compounding persistent economic, social and political concerns. On the other hand, as one speaker at the meeting noted, the Philippines was also known for its “adaptive” capacity. Sadly, however, the capacity for adaptation in this particular case is constrained by a number of factors: weak institutions and limited technology, poor resource bases and inequality of income. For government to address these problems, it will require some long-term strategic planning that goes beyond the next election. As Congress starts to debate Charter Change yet again, that may be too much to hope for.

Clearly there is opportunity here for the private sector and especially those which operate in rural areas to include these issues in their own planning and community consultations. Government is unlikely to take the lead but the issues are too important to ignore.

See: <http://www.policy.aim.edu.ph/GLS%20Events.htm>

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