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Commitment to climate justice

Great efforts - and financial resources - are needed to mitigate the negative consequences of climate change.

The summer of 2018 in Central Europe was one of the warmest and driest since weather records began. And it was one of the longest, because spring in Germany was already summerlike and brought the warmest April and the warmest May since temperatures were measured across the board in 1880. The long 2018 heatwave follows a clear trend: according to data from the German Weather Service (DWD), the mean air temperature in Germany has risen by 1.4 °C since 1881.

But global measurements also make it more than clear that climate change is no longer a mere forecast, but in full swing. On global average, every decade since the 1960s has been warmer than the previous decade; 16 of the 17 warmest years since records began were measured after the year 2000.

In other regions of the world, the consequences have long since taken on forms that threaten the very existence of the population. In recent years, prolonged droughts and rising average temperatures have resulted in massive crop failures in East Africa, for example, and hunger and hardship for the people. The rare precipitation often fell as heavy rain in a very short period of time and led to regional flooding - and thus to harvest losses. The alternation of drought and heavy rain events also increased significantly in South and Southeast Asia. Countries such as Cambodia and Bangladesh experienced very long dry periods and exceptionally heavy monsoon rains. In the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis quite rightly pointed out the complexity of climate change: "Climate change is a global problem with serious environmental aspects and serious social, economic, distributive and political dimensions; it represents one of the most important challenges facing humanity today". (LS, 25)

Not only since the special report "1.5 degrees global warming", published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in early October 2018, it became apparent that the harmful and destructive consequences of climate change will, even with global warming of "only" 1.5°C, assume immense proportions especially for the countries of the tropics and subtropics. In addition to an increase in droughts and floods, the threat of storms will increase, as will the rise in sea levels, storm surges and the loss of entire coastal regions.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, temperature rises and their consequences can still be mitigated by improved climate protection. In its report, it quantifies the necessary costs for restructuring the energy sector in a way to prevent a rising of the global average temperature above 1.5 °C. By 2035, this would require around 2.1 trillion Euros. Moreover, similar drastic measures would also be necessary for climate-friendly change in the transport and agriculture sectors. The good news: At the same time, consistent climate protection promotes other economic sectors and offers enormous economic and ecological opportunities in sectors such as photovoltaics, wind and water power, sustainable agriculture, electric mobility and local public transport. And: in case of inaction the costs of coping with the negative effects of climate change would not be foreseeable - not to mention the plight of those affected, which cannot be quantified anyway.

Losses and damages

Because people and entire regions are existentially threatened by climate change without having contributed significantly to its emergence, climate protection has not only a technical and economic dimension, as Pope Francis repeatedly makes clear: "Today, however, we cannot avoid acknowledging that a truly ecological approach always turns into a social approach that must include justice in environmental discussions in order to hear the lament of the poor as well as the lament of the earth. (LS, 49)" Hence, different questions of justice arise: Who pays for the damage caused? How can the already high and increasing damage to people and the environment be even approximately compensated for? And who will ensure that people can better protect themselves against the increasing dangers - through adaptation measures and disaster prevention?

The voices from the particularly threatened countries and regions are getting louder calling for financial compensation according to the polluter-pays principle. Financial resources are also urgently needed to help those affected, who have already lost their land, reserves and strength in the fight against climate change, to live a dignified life and rebuild their livelihoods. Above all, however, we need a common approach by the international community, as Pope Francis demands: "Social injustice does not concern only individuals, but entire countries, and forces us to think about the ethics of international relations". (LS, 51)

The first to formulate such demands were representatives of small island states. Climate change poses an existential threat, especially for them and for areas close to the sea. If sea levels continue to rise, the people living there will hardly be able to protect themselves from floods, and groundwater and fields will become salty. In the event of storm surges or tsunamis, regions in the interior of the country that have hitherto been considered safe would be affected.

Especially in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, climate change threatens to increase the number and intensity of tropical storms. Although there have always been strong hurricanes in the Caribbean, they follow one another at ever shorter intervals and gain in strength and thus in destructive power. The climate research team of the Niels Bohr Institute at the University of Copenhagen fears ten times as many extreme storm surges when the global average temperature rises by two degrees. According to the United Nations, 1.5 million people were affected by Hurricane Matthew in Haiti in 2016. At the beginning of September 2017, 95 percent of all houses on the island of Barbados were destroyed by Hurricane Irma. Since 2000, Isabel, Ivan, Emily, Katrina, Rita, Wilma, Dean and Felix have already been ravaged in a similar way.

Adjustments and compensations

If the polluter pays principle were applied, people in countries and regions particularly affected by climate change would be entitled to support from the main perpetrators of climate change - the industrialised countries. This includes compensation payments, for example, for crop losses, the destruction of buildings, agricultural land and infrastructure. Equally important are payments for extensive measures to adapt to climate change, particularly in the area of disaster preparedness, which at least help to mitigate the negative consequences of climate change. These include the development of early warning systems for disasters, the construction of dams and water retention basins, the construction of buildings that are safer from storms and floods, and the development of social security systems.

Caritas organizations around the world are working to improve disaster preparedness and adapt to climate change. Numerous projects of the International Department of Caritas Germany in the Andean countries, in Central America and the Caribbean, in South and Southeast Asia or in the Sahel states of East and West Africa, for example, are clear proof that the related measures provide greater protection from climate-related disasters and greater security from the profound negative effects of global climate change to the people affected.

Yet, such adaptations to climate change require just as rapid and non-bureaucratic action as climate protection measures. The six Presidents of the Continental Bishops' Conferences, in a joint declaration of 29 October 2018, also emphasize this. Referring to the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, published by Pope Francis in June 2015, they call on the governments in the run-up to the World Climate Conference, which will take place in Poland at the beginning of December, to act immediately and to take measures for climate protection in order to limit global warming to 1.5 °C. Bishops press for respect for intergenerational justice, i.e. responsibility for future generations, and respect for human dignity and rights, also in the context of climate change. They claim that the 1.5 degree C goal is a prerequisite for human survival, therefore profound and lasting changes towards a sustainable lifestyle are needed. The bishops repeatedly emphasize that the decisive factor here is to implement the necessary measures quickly. Because: "Time is a luxury that we do not have".

Prelate Dr. Peter Neher, December 3rd, 2018