



# Mercy Global Action: Mercy and the Degradation of Earth- The Impact on the Planet as Seen Through the Works of Mercy

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*When using the eight works of Mercy as a lens, the following provides a brief reflection of the impact of climate change on all aspects of society. This snapshot is generalised and can be added to and extended to critique the position of your country at this time.*

### **Feed the Hungry**

Climate change impacts food security: after all, we need to eat. Unpredictable weather, like intense storms or longer than usual dry spells can lead to extensive crop failure. Widespread crop failure can cause food prices, particularly fruit and vegetables to become more expensive. The group most impacted by a rise in price in food are those families on low incomes. Diet is compromised, leading to an increase in other health related issues. This is a brief synopsis of what can happen on a localised level. Short seasonal variations will eventually stabilize and food prices lower.

What we have seen in recent years, is more prolonged drought and an increase in the frequency of intense storms that are more difficult to recover from. In some cases, whole nations are impacted. Imagine the impact of a nation whose main crop to feed the population as well as provide much needed income, fails because of a lack of rain or too much rain? This can also be seen with hunger and starvation, vulnerable nations may find themselves in debt, unable to buy food to feed their people or maintain essential services like clean water or health services. The impact of such an event on vulnerable nations will impact its people for generations to come.

Our consciousness about the impact of climate change on the planet, as well as the impact of human activity on the environment is growing. We are becoming more aware of where our food comes from and what chemicals may be used to grow our food. We are encouraged to lower our carbon footprint by moving towards a primarily plant-based diet rather than a meat-based diet. To choose organic over chemical industrialised methods. The power of the consumer is pushed to help make that change.

I want to draw attention to hunger of other species happening specifically in the marine environment as a result of human activity. Fish are eating micro plastic waste which is becoming embedded into the flesh of fish. This is beginning to enter the food chain when other animals including humans, eat fish.

Plastic waste continues to be a major issue around the world. This fossil-fuel based product is so durable that it will take well over 100 years to breakdown. Many discarded plastic-based packaging materials enter waterways and eventually into the sea. It may float and appear like something edible to many marine animals and sea birds. The plastic will build up in their stomachs, as it is unable to be broken down – thereby causing the animal or bird to starve. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUM58LIU2Lo>)

*An action to consider: The next time you go food shopping pay attention to where your food has come from. How many food miles/kilometres has your food travelled? What packaging has gone into your food? Perhaps also consider the carbon footprint of the food you are purchasing? (The more processing involved, the higher the footprint). There are many online websites to help you calculate this, try and find a website from your country to give a more accurate reading on food miles/kilometres.*

### **Give Water to the Thirsty**

Water is both a human right and need. Life may be able to survive several days without food but cannot survive at all without water. Climate change can impact on the availability of water. When water becomes scarce in a region due to drought then the cost to bring in water increases – impacting on the health and well-being of all.

Water across the globe is becoming a commodity that is sold rather than a “commons” that is a general human right. Industry, mining and commercial enterprises use their power and wealth to buy rights to land and water resources over the rights of the local population. Excessive use of water lowers water tables and increases the risk of contamination, impacting a wider area than the local community. This coupled with other activities that exploit the land makes it very difficult to restore the quantity and quality of water to what it was before over-exploitation of the resource.

Ecological mindsets and consciousness need to change at all levels of society on how we view water. Laws and provisions need to ensure that water resources are used in a way that does not detriment local communities as well as ecological wellbeing of the natural environment.

*An action to consider: Explore the story and issues related to your community and regions water use. Identify the catchment source of your region’s water. Questions to consider: Have you experienced water restrictions, and for what reason? What ecosystems have been impacted from your region’s water consumption? Is the water in your region managed sustainably? Note. In some communities, issues around water are hot topic in local council elections...what questions need to be asked of future councillors?*

## **Clothe the Naked**

Changes in weather due to climate change can provide challenges to communities in keeping warm, dry or cool. This can be costly to families on low incomes. How often have we heard of children having inadequate clothing and footwear in winter? Or, that they lack rain weather gear? Lack of adequate clothing can lead to health complications.

Another dilemma to consider is the affordability of clothing and other fabric products that help us keep warm. The most affordable products tend to be the most damaging to the environment. A vast majority of affordable clothing contains micro-plastic fibre. Each time clothing is washed, micro-plastic fragments find their way into the wastewater system and ultimately into the sea where they affect the marine environment.

*A question to ponder: If your community or region has issues around children lacking inadequate clothing and footwear, what creative solutions could be fostered to encourage community engagement in addressing this issue?*

## **Shelter the Homeless**

“A picture is worth one thousand words”. We have all seen images of the destruction and damage caused to homes due to extreme weather events. Such destruction increases the emotional toll on all families when they see property and memories destroyed. If regions are consistently hit by weather events, insurance rates for property and contents increase, resulting in the possibility of poor families not insuring against the risk of another weather event impacting their lives– thus insurance becomes a luxury.

Adequate housing is a human right, yet the quality of housing also needs to be considered within this reality of climate change. A house that is not warm and dry in winter and cool in summer can lead to health problems of those living in the house. Those who can only afford to rent, sometimes find themselves in homes that are not warm and dry. Choices can be limited due to where their work is, and many landlords are more concerned about making a profit than the ensuring that they have a healthy home for a future tenant. Some countries have introduced legislation to ensure that houses for rent meet a “warrant of fitness for health”. This is an encouraging start however there have been cases of rent increases to cover the renovations needed to make it a healthy home.

The most vulnerable families on low or seasonal incomes are disproportionately affected by changes in weather. If the area they live in is consistently hit by extreme weather events insurance rates increase, or insurance companies can refuse to insure at all -where do they go? If the rents of houses in the entire area increase – that a family could not afford pay – where do they go? We need to be aware that vulnerable families can be ‘trapped’ in an area because the cost to move is more than they can afford.

With changes in climate, urban infrastructure needs to be re-examined. There needs to be a balance between urban sprawl and the development and maintenance of infrastructure such as wastewater and sewerage. The more concrete and tar you have in an area, the more water runoff your infrastructure amenities must cope with. There are many cities and towns globally, that are unable to handle heavy rain events because their current

infrastructure does not have the capacity to do so. These cities and towns then release sewerage and wastewater into river systems and harbours creating pollution and potential health disasters. Urban planners and councillors need to consider sustainable development that can sustain generations into the future, not just for the short term. Such planning and solutions must also consider transient and slum populations. What public infrastructure could be available for these marginalized communities that are often ignored?

*An action to consider: Explore more deeply the state of housing in your local community and region. What issues are of concern?*

### **Visit the Sick**

Changing weather due to climate change can increase the risk of water borne and insect vector diseases. This places stress on public health infrastructure. We are currently seeing this reality with the COVID-19 Pandemic sweeping throughout the world. Although this pandemic is not climate change related, the stress on public health infrastructure is apparent from the news broadcasts around the world.

Mental health must also be considered. Repeated exposure to the damaging effects of climate change related events on family and belongings can 'pile on' additional stress. The phrase "climate anxiety" is a relatively new term but according to experts is on the rise. Climate Change and human behaviour also affects a variety of eco-systems making them sick or dying through habitat destruction and pollution. Many community-based organisations are cleaning up beaches, streams, rivers and replanting and restoring habitats as well as identifying those people or organisations who are polluting waterways. At the same time, many areas are not being healed because they can be seen to have little or no economic value.

*A question to ponder: Does a specific concern in your community come to mind related this work? Explore ways and strategies that might address this issue.*

### **Visit the Imprisoned/ Ransom the Captive**

Climate justice can involve the likelihood of getting arrested. There is concern that several governments that deny or avoid issues related to climate change may ban the right of the public to protest. What happens then to the ability to highlight important issues related to climate change?

There is a need to broaden the viewpoint on traditional understandings of imprisonment and captive. For example, migrants and refugees facing climate disasters in their own countries may be sent back or imprisoned in another. The poor and vulnerable who are 'trapped in their own communities and unable to move within their own country because they lack the resources to do so. Countries are already planning for the future on the issue of climate-induced refugees from nations in their 'neighbourhood'. Many are looking not to deny access but ensure first that their neighbours have the resilience and capacity to adapt, as forced migration is considered a last resort.

We need to also to consider ecosystems and species that are ‘trapped’ in small areas, surrounded by monocrops, slash and burn activities and mining.

*An action to consider: Explore your country’s policy on migrants and refugees. What issues are highlighted?*

### **Bury the Dead**

The reality is that there is an increase in mortality rates due to climate change related events. The increase in intensity of storms and of climate induced diseases are the main contributors to this rise. At the same time, we need to consider that our rituals for burying the dead need to change. With growing populations and increased urban sprawl, the practice of ‘burying the dead’ may not be an option as land set aside for cemeteries become scarce, thereby creating a rise in cost if one chooses burial.

Sea level rise, due to climate change can create another challenge when we remember those we have loved and have buried. Some cemeteries may be located by the coast or estuaries and may be lost due to coastal erosion. This is certainly the case in many Pacific Island villages located on the coast who bury their loved ones close to their homes. As people become more aware of the harm chemicals can do the environment, many are looking at rituals that are low carbon and low pollution alternatives -choosing not to become embalmed or choosing unbleached cardboard coffins over traditional varnished wooden coffins. Cremation, although emitting pollutants may be offset by having native trees planting rituals in memorial.

*An action to consider: Plan your own funeral! Look at low carbon and low pollutant alternatives. Involve your family and community.*

### **Care for our Common Home**

Care for our common home is the newest work of Mercy. Human activity is severely impacting the health of the planet (our common home). Signs of human ‘wasteful behaviour’ has been found from the atmosphere down into the deepest sea trench in the world. Our attitude is likened to seeing everything as disposable; that is, use it once and dispose of it. Our current economic system has perpetuated this by encouraging constant consumerism. The needs of the individual in this system is far more important than the needs of the collective (and I include all habitats and ecosystems as part of the collective). To move from this mindset, we need to remember that we are in a relationship with the Earth and it is a two-way relationship. The planet has cared and sustained and nourished us from the beginning. The question we now need to ask and reflect on – Is how have we reciprocated?

*Some questions to reflect on:*

- *What is my response/feeling to the information shared?*
- *Who is most impacted by the climate crisis?*
- *What systemic injustices are highlighted when using the Works of Mercy as a lens?*

- *In what ways is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development working on climate change in your country?*
- *Where could future action or energy be focused on in response to the issues highlighted?*
- *What other questions raise up in me?*

**Further Reading:**

Pope Francis *Encyclical Laudato Si' (24 May 2015)*

Northcott, Michael S. (2007, second printing 2009) *A moral climate: the ethics of global warming*. Orbis Books.

Peppard, Christina Z. (2014) *Just Water: Theology, Ethics and the Global Water Crisis*. Orbis Books.

There are many resources in the library of Mercy World website

(<https://www.mercyworld.org/library/> ). The resources related to global action are relevant. I draw your attention to:

Water & Sanitation: A Peoples Guide to SD6; A Rights based Approach to Implementation, 2016.

Water, Women & Wisdom (A companion document to water & sanitation), 2017.

This document is based on a recorded presentation to the Mercy Global Action Leadership Emerging Leaders Fellowship in December 2019.

For those wanting a copy of the webinar please contact *Colleen Swain*

[leadershipadvocacy@mercyinternational.ie](mailto:leadershipadvocacy@mercyinternational.ie) For those wanting the PowerPoint only, please contact *Bridget Crisp rsm* [bridget.crisp@xtra.co.nz](mailto:bridget.crisp@xtra.co.nz)