

**The economic crisis**  
**Towards sustainable economies and livelihoods**  
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## **The economic crisis: a global perspective**

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Just the other day, I was part of a panel at an environmental debate in Reading. And one of the questions put to us from the floor was whether we would agree that the economic crisis was God's way of telling us to slow down and to live more simply in future.

I have to say that I find such a question deeply offensive. I am not questioning the desirability of those of us who live in the home counties taking a hard look at our lifestyles. But what about all those people living in poor communities around the world who have suddenly found their financial support from organisations like Christian Aid cut by 30 per cent, or maybe now 40 per cent, because of the weakness of the pound? UN figures suggest that the global recession will set back some key measures of poverty such as child mortality by six years, which is what happened in the last recession. To suggest that this situation is God-given and serves a higher purpose is to me quite unacceptable.

But what that conversation does highlight is the economic injustice that is inherent in the current situation. So what I'd like to do very briefly is to say something about the nature of that injustice and then to offer an even more brief theological response.

### *(a) Economic injustice*

(i) What we are now seeing worldwide is that it's poor people who are suffering most from a crisis that's not of their making. (And if that sounds familiar, it's because we are saying exactly the same thing about the crisis of climate change.) This is true whether we're thinking of less well-off Europeans who can't find work, or farmers in the developing world whose overseas markets are rapidly drying up.

For an organisation like Christian Aid that exists to relieve poverty, there is what looks like not a double whammy but a triple whammy: we will face greater demands on our resources but we will have fewer resources; the falling pound means that our overseas operations (our field offices and partner programmes around the world) will cost more; and it is unrealistic to expect that our income will continue to rise to meet these demands, even though research tells us that in a time of recession Christian charities tend to do better than secular ones.

We should remember as well that a significant part of the GNP of many developing countries takes the form of 'remittances' – money sent back home by people working overseas in order to support their families. Many of those people will find their own income under threat, with a knock-on effect for their relatives back home.

(ii) If it is the case that the current crisis has been caused by, firstly, inadequate global financial regulation, and, secondly, a lack of transparency (in the banking sector in particular), it has to be said that these are two elements that have long been instrumental in keeping poor people poor in the developing world. The work that we and our overseas partners have done on tax justice has shown us this: lax tax regulation that enables transnational corporations to avoid tax in the countries where they work, and the lack of transparency (i.e. secrecy) that surrounds international tax havens, have together deprived many developing countries of the revenue that would have enabled them to climb out of poverty without recourse to international aid. And tax income is the only sustainable source of finance for poor countries seeking to develop independently.

Ann Pettifor said earlier that “the poor have no assets”. But many of them do. The problem is that these assets are in the ground. When transnational companies extract the mineral resources of developing countries and avoid paying a proper amount of tax, we see that poor countries are having their assets stolen from them. Ironically it is only now that some of us, at least, in the rich (global) North are beginning to experience the effect of global financial malpractice and consequent economic injustice that very many people in the global South have known about for years.

*(b) A theological response*

From our viewpoint as a Christian overseas development agency, the key factor in all this is justice, or rather the lack of it. And we do not have in any way to adjust our overall theology of development to take account of this latest instance of injustice to the poor. The theology we have articulated over the last few years is a relational theology: where human beings enjoy a privileged relationship of “oneness” in God and in Jesus Christ (as spelt out, for example, in John 17) and in turn therefore are bound to be in a right relationship with one another “in Christ” (as well as a right relationship with God and with creation). So our calling to love God and love our neighbour is reflected in our just relationships with one another. Where these relationships go wrong – where we fail to see Jesus in the face of the poor, where we seek to dominate one another, where structures of community and state are oppressive – that is injustice.

And from these relationships there flow what we now know as human rights: the right of the other to life, the right to a home, to health and so on and so on. This is why Christian Aid’s approach to development is rights-based; this is why our underlying relational theology, which commits us to fighting poverty and the injustice that underlies poverty, is so important to us.

*(c) The churches?*

So in the light of all this, how are Christians to behave in a time of global economic crisis? Above all, I would suggest, we need to look at those relationships that it is in our power to put right and to add our individual voices to the demand to mend relationships which it is beyond us to address at a personal level. To get tangled up in denouncing people’s ‘greed’ is unhelpful: what is done is done, and in any case what is greed? (Someone who has more than I have, I suspect, wherever I happen to be in the league table of prosperity.) What we need to do now is to address the injustice being done to the poor, both in terms of stepping up the economic help that they need, and, particularly in the case of developing countries, putting in place effective financial regulation that will help them to develop independently and sustainably in the future.

And it is, I believe, incumbent on the Christian churches to use their formidable collective strength to influence these events. We urgently need to hear a truly prophetic voice from the churches – given that their voice is all too often silent and that the messages that are heard are not infrequently based on lack of information or misinformation. That is where I think we have the potential to really make a difference in terms of addressing economic injustice and poverty. As we work to rebuild our relationships with one another, and with communities and states, a unified and prophetic Church is one thing that it is within the power of Christians, and Christians alone, to bring about.