

## U3A C Climate Change Workshop July 2014

### Workshop Notes



This was the second Climate Change workshop, following the success of a similar event held in July 2013, which focused on global crises. It was attended by 40 U3AC members.

Brian Wallis, U3A Environment Committee Chairman, welcomed delegates, and asked Vanessa Tilling to introduce Dr Aled Jones, Director of The Global Sustainability Institute at Anglia Ruskin University.

Aled (PowerPoint available) stated that global resources e.g. fresh water, food and energy, were finite and resource scarcity led to price spikes, political instability and war. Increasing inequality in and between nations exacerbated these issues.

Societal impacts were:-

- Increasing uncertainty lowers ability of governments to invest in infrastructure
- System and countries were not resilient
- Systemic risks spread as some governments (US and UK) heavily in debt
- Commodity prices were highly volatile
- Increasing inequality
- Worsening living conditions and food supply
- Needed to improve industrial productivity to meet world requirements
- International instability. (Graphs showed link between resource scarcity and political tension e.g. Arab Spring.)

The Fifth IPCC report predicted more extreme weather events. Insurance companies had changed their risk estimates eg a 1 in 100 year flood risk to 1 in 20 years.

It had been estimated that about one trillion\$ additional money was needed for climate solutions by 2030, and we needed to decarbonise by 2050.

Nigeria, China and India each had a population of over one billion, and their economics and politics were increasingly globally significant. It was probable that Africa would stay poor.

Delegates then divided into small groups to discuss specific questions.

Two workshops considered whether democracy could solve these issues and this included a consideration of how much democracy we had in the UK and who had power. The predominant view was that we do not have true democracy now – although it is better in the UK than in many other countries. A Churchillian quote was cited on the lines that democracy was the least worst of all political ideals. There had been a reverse shift to policy based evidence (rather than evidence based policies). It was thought that it would be beneficial to adopt longer term policies, like Germany, as a 4-year political stint was not conducive to making substantial positive changes necessitated by environment. With the likelihood of coalition governments for some time in the UK, it was suggested that an independent national body should be created to plan for longer term policies, such as energy. A few considered that the UK infrastructure privatisation was a barrier to sustainability. Others felt that the media should take greater responsibility for its influence – but none were convinced that the media should be politically controlled.

Another workshop had considered energy. It concluded that:-

We need to move to a mix of energy sources and reduce our energy demands. It would be foolish to stop investing in our existing sources of fossil fuel; however, it would help to have some clarity on the potential for each source to contribute to the overall mix. At some point in the future, renewable energy sources will overtake fossil fuels.

International cooperation has worked in a few cases e.g. CFC bans had led to a diminution of the Ozone hole, but that had been fairly easy and the US had had a chemical solution.

The obsession with economic growth e.g. GDP was questioned. Growth was not invested in the things which matter; many goods were produced with built-in obsolescence. Energy saving devices were helping with energy demand, but there was a long way to go before they had a major impact.

The state of the global economy was due to unequal power, resulting in unfair resource distribution. There was a need for more international sharing of infrastructure and a national agreement to reduce overall consumption.

After lunch, the group was addressed by a Panel of four speakers, who introduced the topics of Society; Politics; Food and Water. Delegates then broke into four smaller groups to discuss each of these topics in more detail.

**Aled Jones** discussed societal issues; who was in power – people, NGOs, business? There did seem to be a disconnect between decision makers and people e.g. DEFRA seemed insensitive to the fact that food price increases, which had risen recently from 1-2% to 2- 3% had resulted in a major impact on poorer individuals (leading to a huge increase in the use of food banks). The use of carbon tracking was considered. (Aled was thanked as he had to leave at this point.)

**Julian Huppert**, Cambridge City MP, spoke about political matters. Climate change was one of the biggest challenges that our species was facing. Most UK politicians accepted this and it was not a party issue unlike in Australia. He mentioned the Green Deal which had a very low take up but a number of people had used the assessment and then paid for energy improvements themselves. The UK was investing in technological solutions e.g. thorium nuclear power, which has the same advantages as uranium nuclear power, but with much less harmful waste and no ability to make bombs. The UK could not solve climate change issues by itself, but countries needed to work

together e.g. China was heavily involved in creating technical solutions. He suggested that if we wanted to try to influence politicians, we should contact them (write, email, use of social media). (Julian was thanked for his input as he had to leave for a meeting elsewhere.)

**Prof Jane Heal** outlined food issues. Twenty-Five percent of a person's Carbon Footprint was related to food. There was waste at all points of the food chain; one third of the black bin contents was food, which had cost implications for the consumer, the local council and the environment. We should eat less food and particularly less meat and dairy products; this would result in a saving of energy as well as health improvements. We should also try to eat more local and seasonal food.

**Alan Bird** discussed water. Lack of potable water was causing huge problems in Africa, and drought and flooding were increasing worldwide issues. Recently UK infrastructure for dealing with flood risk had been reduced. In Cambridge and the East of England there was increased risk of flooding due to increasing numbers of heavy downpours, with drainage unable to cope due to more impermeable surfaces. There were domestic measures we could take, such as installing wider gutters and water butts, and leading rainwater into our gardens. We should also check out our own flood risk. (The Environment Agency website has interactive flooding maps where people could check their flood risk by using their postcode.)

### **Workshop Feedback**

#### **Society**

The group agreed that the impacts of climate change, and by implication resource shortages, had a severe social impact on poorer countries and individuals. UK Government support for climate change had waned over recent years: it will be a major task to get it back on the agenda. There should be coherent government policies which took account of longer term needs. The media, especially the Sun and the Mail, had significant influence over their readership. Funding of the health service will be a major concern over the next few years: there should be increased pressure on government to put greater funding into the NHS from direct taxation.

Social media was becoming an important influence on politics especially for single issues, with "lovely groups" and on line petitions becoming more prevalent. It was suggested U3A members should make more use of social media – possibly a course on Twitter, or establishing websites for specific issues. Brian Wallis appealed for members who had relevant IT skills to come forward.

#### **Political issues**

The background of Parliamentarians and civil servants was considered too narrow – mainly from law, PPE and finance. Also class differences were significant leading to the risk of a monoculture – this has a serious impact on, for example health inequality. Parliament should better reflect the society it represents.

Elected representatives did not have power; they were heavily influenced by transnational organisations. Public opinion tended to follow changes in law e.g. death penalty. It was felt that local public servants were more in contact with people. It was easier to demonstrate the effect of change than what would happen if the change did not take place; this impacted on practical politics. Whilst it was suggested by one person that the US political system was more powerful (than the

UKs), in fact the President could not make any changes without going via Congress and the House of Representatives. There was a big gap on climate change views between the President and the “tea party” politicians, which made it difficult to make progress.

However, in the UK, Owen Patterson (until recently, Environment Minister) had recently turned down a climate briefing from the Met. Office! It was suggested that perhaps we should have environmental courts, with a similar system to Jury Service, whereupon citizens were called upon to make decisions on behalf of their local communities.

**Food.** Supermarkets were key players in encouraging food waste; they tempted us to buy too much and had too much power over farmers. Our age group tended not to waste food. Cooking education was considered important; it seemed to have gone out of fashion. Grandparents could play a key role in teaching basic cooking skills and healthy diet. Some thought food should be more expensive as it would be valued more, but then everyone needed sufficient money to afford ‘good’ food ; this might be resolved if everyone was earning a living wage. It was noted that there were a number of groups in Cambridge addressing food waste. Views were expressed that food had an emotional value, as well as social aspects: it was a complicated issue.

**Water.** The water supplier to Cambridge City is Cambridge Water Company which had been owned since 2011 by South Staffordshire Water, in 2013 this had been acquired by the USA private company KKR and Co LP..

Under normal circumstances the supply is of high quality, but if there was a prolonged drought, which will become more frequent with climate change, then we would be relying on a poorer quality water supply from Thetford. The sewerage system was Victorian and needed improvement. Waste water, water supply and surface water drainage systems urgently needed updating in Cambridge. A new tunnel bore had been built following floods in 1977-78 but this was insufficient for the current increased flooding incidents. Also the additional growth in Cambridge would impact on the demand for water supply, waste water collection and treatment along with surface water collection.

There are things we could do to reduce our water demand and also reduce the risks of flooding: e.g. use grey water for toilet flushing; install wider profile guttering; install water butts; and pipe the water onto our gardens to reduce and slow down the flow into the public drainage system.

Globally, in some drier countries, a certain amount of water is supplied at a low unit cost and more water is available at a progressively higher unit cost. . Also the use of water for agriculture is monitored; e.g. Botswana has a national policy that water is too scarce a resource for crop irrigation; food is imported from South Africa instead.

One delegate reported that a drought in southern California a few years ago forced consumers to cut back on water use by banning garden watering. There is the potential for governments to intervene in some situations, and put pressure on the public to reduce consumption.

## **Summary**

Ken Edwards summarised the workshop day. There had been consideration of a wide number of issues associated with climate change, its relationship to other resources, and how they interact in complex ways. GDP was not a good indicator of human wellbeing, but the latter was difficult to

measure. However, wellbeing indices are currently being developed that will relate to quality of life. Was growth a good thing or did it exacerbate the problems? The UK was an indebted nation, on both national and individual levels: some economic growth was needed to stimulate technical development, which would help to fix the problems. However, now we have austerity which disproportionately affects the poor. There were a number of dilemmas; there was inequality with the impacts of climate change, because poorer people and communities were less able to adapt. Climate change had slipped in priority – the deniers had gained strength; the public was not convinced, its opinion over influenced by the newspapers. There has been disputes over the scientific evidence and misapplication of the principles, which had added to the public scepticism.

There was a lot that could be done by individuals and groups such as U3AC. Ken had run a climate change course a while ago; at that time the argument that climate change was happening was less convincing. However, whilst the recession had reduced economic activity, the evidence of global warming is much stronger now. We needed to consider adaptation as well as mitigation. We needed to lobby, including writing to our MPs; to use social media, including writing letters of protest to e.g. the Daily Mail; and to take our own actions to make small positive changes.

The Chairman thanked all the speakers and workshop attendants for their input.

### **Feedback**

Twenty questionnaires were returned. Ninety per cent felt better informed about climate change. The vast majority had enough opportunities to express their views, while more wanted to know where to find information. Again, most felt more able to discuss these issues with others. The workshop organisation was praised with a few suggestions for improvements.

Topics that people wanted to know more about were: soil, farming, biodiversity and transport. A few offered expertise in some of these subjects. We received a few offers of help on social media, IT and web pages (which we shall explore.)

It was suggested that U3Ac could manage its heating and air conditioning better, remind members to turn off unnecessary lights, not use disposable cups, train people to use social media and encourage members to travel more sustainably.

A wide range of 'good' environmental behaviours was practised by workshop members. Many had decided to do more for example, to eat more seasonal and local food, less milk and dairy, reduce food waste; reduce waste energy and energy use. Several indicated that they would take steps to collect rainwater. Social media was recognised as being significant in influencing those such as MPs and a number wanted to know how to use these methods.

Elizabeth May (U3Ac Environment Committee Secretary.)