The quest for climate control

Aubrey Meyer is a campaigner against global warming. Here he outlines what led to him discovering and developing the 'contraction and convergence' principle to combat climate change

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In 1990 my daughter turned four. She came home from nursery school one day and asked, "Daddy, is the planet really dying?" Having become aware of climate change, I gave up a career in music and started a campaign to save the world from global warming.

My daughter had seen pictures on her classroom walls of dead and dying plants and animals. She'd also seen me crawling around the flat playing with her but also trying to figure out what to do about climate change. I was numb from the question. Smiling through gritted teeth I said something like, "I don't think so, darling. I hope not. But don't you worry, your Daddy will sort it out."

In November that year, as a member of the UK Green Party, I attended the UN in Geneva, where negotiations about climate change were being started. While the then Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher used the occasion to launch the first Gulf War, King Hussein of Jordan focused on the emissions that would result if all the oil-well heads in Kuwait and Iraq were blown-up. Arguing against the war, he spoke movingly about the distress in the Middle East, asking where was the "ecology of the human heart".

In 1991 the pollution from the burning oil wells was being deposited all over the planet and I became involved in the effort to establish what is now known as Contraction and Convergence (C&C). C&C was a rational response to the objective and principles laid out in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which was agreed a year later at the Earth Summit in Rio and ratified into force in 1995.

The global objective of UNFCCC was to stabilise the dangerously rising concentration of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. These concentrations rise as an accumulation of the gas emissions that come mostly from fossil fuel use, but also from changes to land use. Greenhouse gases trap heat, and the more these accumulate the more sun heat is trapped on the planet. The UNFCCC recognises that temperature rise has the potential to trigger runaway climate change and end life on the planet as we know it.

The important principles are precaution and equity. Precaution says that uncertainty when measuring rates of change must not be used as a reason for delaying the control of emissions, which must cease as rapidly as possible. Equity says that this response must be rational, adequate and fair, lest it become a futile lottery.

By 1990, the world of UN climate change negotiations was uncannily familiar to me, having grown up in South Africa and witnessed apartheid. The new "sustainable development" covertly mimicked the old "separate development". In this global apartheid, the poor majority of the world was once again the discard.

While the poor – particularly in Africa – were getting a lousy climate-deal, some economists claimed that markets would take care of the problem by "scientifically proving" it was cheaper to adapt to climate change than prevent it – and that the rich could respond by simply by shopping around for good deals. These included getting the right price for the natty new emissions-free energy technologies (like cars and windmills) and, as the debate progressed, shopping around for the number of trees that equalled their carbon footprints as they travelled on trans-Atlantic consumer sprees.

This was rank madness. Climate change was already causing massive social costs and destruction around the world. And as concentrations were cumulative, things were obviously going to get much worse. If there's a tap filling a bath, to stop the bath over-flowing, the tap must be turned right off. To my eternal disgrace I called this trivial economics "the economics of genocide".

Since the second world war – and in a pattern of overall income growth at 3% a year – one third of the world's population has been cumulatively responsible for 80% of the gas emissions driving climate change. Yet in the same period the other two-thirds were responsible for 20% of emissions. To cap that, the climate-change-damages driven by the pollution of the rich on the heads of the poor were estimated to be growing at a rate of 6% a year – in other words, at twice the rate of economic growth.

So the debate was how to prevent climate change running away and making life on the planet impossible. The answer was "contraction and convergence" (C&C). But only if we acted fast enough to solve the problem faster than we were creating it.

But at present we are practising what one might think of as mutually-assisted suicide or "MAS". MAS is beyond MAD, which is mutually-assured destruction. Under MAD, fingers were poised over the nuclear buttons with each side saying: "If you push, I'll push first".

In the MAS of expansion and divergence, both rich and poor countries are driving with their feet flat on the accelerator playing chicken and effectively saying: "I won't lift my foot off the accelerator unless you lift yours". Consequently exhaust emissions go everywhere and climate change is described as an act of war by the rich against the poor, and vice versa.

During the period in which my daughter has grown up and become 21, C&C has attracted enormous support. Yes there are detractors, but to them I say this: If between the economy of the human head and the ecology of the human heart you have anything better, please let us all know what it is.