

5 January 2007

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INDEPENDENT QUAKER JOURNALISM SINCE 1843

Contraction & convergence – the solution to climate change?

Imagine a solution to climate change which would simultaneously tackle global poverty and inequality. Aubrey Meyer's 'Contraction and Convergence' proposal could be an answer to both.

Agreement has yet to be reached on effective responses to climate change. Current CO₂ emissions are largely produced by industrial and energy-rich countries. One choice could be for them to decide what should be done, if anything, and use military force to have their way. A more promising approach is to find a logical, rational principle that seems fair and to seek universal agreement for it, perhaps led by some countries. Aubrey Meyer, director of the Global Commons Institute has come up with a principle, increasingly gaining support, which keeps firmly in mind what the planet can support and what it cannot. People own land but nobody owns the air we breathe. It is part of the 'global commons'. Each person has an equal right to use that air, but the right needs balancing by a responsibility not to pollute beyond the atmosphere's ability to recover. Meyer's formula for emission limit for each country is: safe level of global carbon emissions, divided by the world population, multiplied by the population of that country.

What would Contraction and Convergence mean for us?

- UK total emissions (including international aviation) amount to 13,000kg per person of CO₂-equivalent greenhouse gases.
- USA emissions average about 21,000kg per person
- India's national emissions average about 1,300kg per person.
- The global average is about 5,800kg per person
- If the world is to avoid the worst effects of climate change, global emissions will need to be reduced by thirty per cent or more, to below 4,000kg per person, over the next forty years. For the UK, that's a seventy per cent reduction.

Industrialised countries are far exceeding their 'share' of carbon emission, while agrarian energy poor countries produce much less than their share. The rich countries are destroying the global commons at the expense of the poor. The rich need to contract. And the poor? Meyer comes up with a startling extra concept. The poor have equal rights to the global air with the rich, so though poor financially they have something they can 'trade' for money with the rich - they can sell their emission rights to them but no more than their share of the world's emission rights. This extra money to the poor can not be spent by them on causing carbon emissions but it could be used for making poverty history in other ways. Paying for their excess pollution would encourage the rich to seek greener forms of energy. If contraction and convergence gained wide enough acceptance to become international, everyone would benefit.

In brief:

Contraction requires all governments to be collectively bound by an upper limit to greenhouse gas emissions which would be reviewed periodically and diminish over time.

Convergence means that each year's global emissions budget is shared out so that countries converge towards the same

allocation per inhabitant by an agreed date. It recognises global equality in our duty of care for the atmosphere.

Developing nations have warmed to the principle because they would have emission credits to trade.

Contraction and Convergence has won the support of the European Parliament, various church groups and environmental groups like Friends of the Earth.

Contraction and Convergence could play a major role in reducing climate change and in reducing the growing gap between rich and poor. The idea that everyone has rights to air, a global commons given us by God, fits with the Quaker Testimony to Equality.

Could Quakers lead the way as we have in the past? What might that mean? Dare to imagine your PM building Contraction and Convergence into its Finance and Property Group, perhaps sending donations to poor countries to pay for all excess carbon emissions! How might Contraction and Convergence affect Friends House? Meeting for sufferings? We cannot continue with business as usual. Our Quaker testimonies to Simplicity, Equality, Sustainability and Peace provide us with a basis for action. Can Quakers lead the way in championing this as we did the abolition of the slave trade?

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Contraction and Convergence: the global solution to climate change by Aubrey Meyer is published by Green Books on behalf of the Schumacher Society.
ISBN I 870098 94 3. £5.