

Climate crisis—urgent action needed now!

Statement initiated by participants in the Climate Change | Social Change conference, Sydney, Australia, April 11-13, 2008

The following statement was started by the participants in the Climate Change | Social Change conference. Anyone who agrees with it is welcome to add their signature, and an updated list of signatories will be issued on a regular basis.

It is being distributed to environmental, trade union, Indigenous, migrant, religious and community organisations to help build the movement against global warming



1. The latest climate science shows that the global warming crisis is already here

The evidence about global warming is more alarming than ever. It is likely that critical “tipping points” once believed to lie in the future have already been passed (see *Climate Change and Trace Gases*, by James Hansen et al, 2007, available at www.carbonequity.info):

- Arctic ice loss reached 20% by extent over the past two years as against 7% a decade over the period between 1979 and 2005; the volume of Arctic summer ice is estimated to have fallen by 80% over the last 40 years; glacier movement in Greenland is speeding up, producing massive “ice quakes”; in Antarctica the 2002 collapse of the Larsen B ice shelf and the recent splitting of the Wilkins ice shelf raises the spectre of the collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet (and sea levels rising 5 metres).
- The feedback sources of global warming are accelerating, with declining reflection of solar radiation, falling carbon absorption capacity of soils, forests and oceans and increased forest fires and methane release from Siberian tundra permafrost. By 2006 global annual human CO₂ emissions were 9.9 gigatonnes of carbon, with only 4 gigatonnes being absorbed by the Earth’s “carbon sinks”. Some scientists project this figure to fall to 2.7 gigatonnes of carbon a year by 2030.
- As a result, according to James Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute of Space Science, “the Earth is gaining more heat than it is losing: currently 0.5 to 1 watts per square metre. This planetary imbalance is sufficient to melt ice corresponding to a 1 metre of sea level rise per decade, if the extra energy were used entirely for that purpose—and the energy imbalance could double if emissions keep growing.”

2. A 2° maximum average increase in world temperature probably won't stop destructive climate change

A 2° increase in average global atmospheric temperature above pre-industrial levels has been widely accepted (for example, by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) as the maximum allowable

if uncontrollable global warming is to be avoided. The chance of a 2° increase has been rated at between 38% (IPCC) and 78% (Hadley Centre) if greenhouse gas concentrations reach 450 parts per million of CO₂ equivalent (CO₂e). But these have *already* reached 459ppm CO₂e, producing a 0.8° increase and “locking in” another 0.6°. Clearly, an upper limit of 450ppm is too high, risking further destructive climate feedbacks.

3. We need a greenhouse gas reduction target that fits the global warming crisis

Existing broadly accepted targets for greenhouse gas reduction (GGR) are therefore far too little far too late. In particular, the commonly accepted GGR target of 60% by 2050 compared to 2000 (advanced by the Stern Review, European Union and the Australian Labor Party) would allow greenhouse gas concentrations to grow to 550ppm CO₂e, making a 3° average temperature increase a 50:50 chance and risking even more extreme increases—with catastrophic consequences for billions of human beings and entire ecosystems. This frightening reality dictates an approach of stopping greenhouse gas concentration increases as soon as possible, with the goal of reducing them to a long term safe and sustainable level (around 300-325ppm CO₂, roughly corresponding to a 0.5° increase from pre-industrial levels).

4. Despite the urgency of the crisis, solutions are possible

Despite the enormity of the global warming threat the carbon-reducing technologies, industrial processes and forms of economic and social organisation that can reverse it already exist or can be created. Many needed policies (e.g., rapid energy demand reduction and application of sustainable energy technologies) are already being introduced, albeit on an extremely inadequate and under-resourced scale. The central challenge is to speed up the replacement of carbon-intensive infrastructure and forms of economic and social organisation, setting in place the measures supporting climate sustainability at a pace that meets the timetable for the greenhouse gas emission cuts the Earth needs.

5. Vested interests stand in the way of climate sustainability and have to be confronted

Reaching this goal involves more than a debate about climate science and government climate policy. It is also, even primarily, a struggle against those forces with a vested interest in keeping the transition to sustainability within a framework that doesn't risk the profitability of carbon-intensive investments. Also, while the global rate of investment in renewable and sustainable technologies is increasing rapidly from a low base, it still falls far short of that needed to produce the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions required by climate science.

6. Existing climate change policy is falling behind the challenge

Likewise, the presently preferred lead policies against global warming—carbon trading schemes and “feed-in” tariffs—have not speeded up the uptake of sustainable technologies to the pace needed. Even the most advanced Mandated Renewable Energy Targets envisaged by mainstream environmental organisations would see 60-70% of energy still being produced by carbon-intensive technologies (coal and oil) in 2020. In those states and regions where such policies done most to increase energy efficiency and stimulate private investment in sustainable technologies (Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Spain, California) energy use and greenhouse gas emissions are at best falling very slowly. At the international level the Kyoto Protocol failed and the Bali round threatens to repeat that failure on a larger scale.

7. The real road to climate sustainability has five basic elements

There can be no real shift to climate sustainability without five core elements—properly resourced public agencies to drive the sustainability effort, an international framework where the First World pays the vast bulk of the price of reversing global warming, an end to rampant consumerism, vastly strengthened campaigns for climate sustainability, and building a powerful political alliance for climate sustainability with social justice. These imperatives are explained in the next five sections.

8. *We need properly funded public agencies to oversee the sustainability transition*

Climate sustainability will never be achieved if basically entrusted to the profit motive and the market. At the core of any successful transition will be a public agency or agencies entrusted with guaranteeing that adequate targets are met. Without going into detail—which will vary widely by country and region and require ongoing elaboration to meet local conditions—the main tasks of any public agency overseeing the transition to climate sustainability will be to:

- a. Drive the implantation of energy saving and efficiency programs, including mandatory and enforceable minimum standards for domestic and commercial buildings;
- b. Oversee programs to convert existing building stock to zero-carbon status;
- c. Implement a plan to introduce renewable energy technologies at all levels, simultaneously phasing out fossil fuel fired power generation;
- d. Foster research, development and the application of sustainable technologies and processes, with a view to achieving their mass application as rapidly as possible;
- e. Oversee the upgrading and spread of rail networks to provide the capacity to shift long-distance freight movement from road and air to rail;
- f. Oversee the conversion of the car industry to non-polluting forms of propulsion;
- g. Foster the growth of a new model of agriculture and forestry which includes the advances of methods like permaculture and aims to retain and increase the carbon-absorption capacity of the land biosphere;
- h. Oversee the closure of polluting industries and the full retraining on full pay and conditions of the workers affected; and
- i. Promote social instead of private ways of meeting basic human needs in housing, domestic work, child and aged care, transport etc.

9. *We need international solidarity in the fight against global warming*

The advanced industrial nations, whose own growth continues to depend on access on favourable terms to Third World resources, have been responsible for 76% of emissions since the beginning of industrialisation. Powers like the United States, Europe, Japan and Australia cannot now demand that those economies that are presently at earlier points on the path of industrialisation (or still locked in underdevelopment) pay the price for decarbonising the structures of production for which they are overwhelmingly responsible.

Accepting the cost burden of overseeing the transition to climate sustainability in developing countries involves the creation of a global sustainability fund overwhelmingly funded by the advanced industrial powers. Resources presently wasted on military spending could, if switched into such a fund, finance a rapid global switch to renewable energy sources.

10. *We need a struggle against consumerism*

The struggle for sustainability is also a struggle against the consumerist, individualist life-style of “developed” industrial society and a search for a human-centred and community based social existence. Solidarity with the struggles of Indigenous peoples whose environments have been stolen and most ravaged by “development” and the study of their values will teach a lot about what sustainability and care for ecosystems really mean.

In particular, attention to these values will be an important element in countering the mass lifestyles promoted by the vested interests of the corporations—with their ever higher levels of consumption, built-in obsolescence and throw away culture.

11. *We need the broadest possible alliance for social justice and climate sustainability*

The bedrock of the transition to climate sustainability lies in developing the alliance between the environmental and climate change movement and working people, young people, the unemployed and welfare recipients, and their union and community organisations. Such an alliance can only develop on the basis that the costs of the transition to climate sustainability are funded from reduced wasteful

spending in government budgets (for example, on military hardware and subsidies to polluting industries) or through taxes borne by those who bear greatest responsibility for the climate crisis and those who can most afford to pay. Whatever the mechanisms used to reduce the use of carbon-intensive products and processes and to harvest the income to help fund the replacement of carbon-intensive infrastructure, the burden must fall primarily on the corporate world and the rich. The history of eco-taxation has already seen too many failed attempts at making ordinary consumers pay, leading to working-class and popular alienation from the environment movement, and providing dangerous openings for right-wing anti-environmental demagogues. If those opposed to radical action for climate sustainability succeed in turning the mass of working people against the global warming struggle there simply will not be a sustainability transition—the majority (especially the poorest and most oppressed) will see the fight against global warming as an attack on their living standards, social gains and rights, reproducing on a massive and debilitating scale the split between forest preservation movements and timber workers in places like Tasmania, the US and Canada.

The struggle for climate sustainability will also be weakened if it separates itself from other struggles for social justice and equality. By supporting all those campaigning for their rights the climate sustainability struggle will strengthen its own cause.

12. We must build all campaigns for climate sustainability

The emergence of movements that give powerful and sustained organisation to the profound community concern about global warming will be the key driver of the climate transition. The Climate Change | Social Change conference commits to helping build the movement for climate sustainability in Australia and elsewhere.

The signatories to this statement come from a wide range of backgrounds—climate activism, scientific climate research, Green, socialist, Indigenous, feminist and many more. We do not agree on all the issues in play in the great, complex debate about how to confront and defeat global warming, but we do agree on the basic approach outlined in this statement. We understand that ongoing involvement in the struggle for climate sustainability will give us the best chance of further developing policy against global warming and resolving present differences.

We are also committed to further developing the discussion that has taken place at this conference, and will form an email network to this end. We urge everyone committed to the vital cause of reversing global warming—even if they do not agree with the analysis and proposals presented here—to join it and use it to develop our collective understanding and effort to confront humanity's most vital challenge.

Signatories (at April 19, 2008)

The signatories have signed in a personal capacity. Titles are for identification purposes only

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