



A theological reflection on Loss and Damage

A Christian Aid discussion paper

Christian Aid recognises climate change is already changing our planet, and affecting our relationships with each another. Even with effective mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change there will be increasing 'Loss and Damage' which will disproportionately affect poorer people in poorer countries. As part of Christian Aid's deepening work on Loss and Damage, we invite church leaders, congregations and others motivated by Christian faith to explore what Loss and Damage means from a theological perspective. This paper is intended to stimulate reflection, discussion and engagement on Loss and Damage. It is a theological reflection on Loss and Damage; the start of a discussion.

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Creation as Intended

A gift for human flourishing

In 2019, Japan hosted the Rugby World Cup in what was considered a hugely successful tournament. This was more so because the nation had suffered several climate related catastrophes which at one point was a cause of concern for the tournament organisers. A year before the tournament began a major storm struck Kobe and Osaka leaving a trail of death and destruction and affecting the planning for the training camps where two nations, the USA and Italy would be based. The Guardian noted that, "Conditions were so extreme that had it been 12 months later, neither of the team camps allocated to Italy or the USA in Osaka would have been available for use".¹

But an even more compelling report on the Rugby World Cup was produced by Christian Aid. While noting the number of players from small island nations like Fiji and Samoa who had changed citizenship to play for bigger Western rugby powers like New Zealand, England and Australia, the authors noted, "If rugby's

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/sep/19/year-japan-rugby-braced-threat-natural-disasters>



moral crisis when it comes to the Pacific islands is self-evident, its ignorance of the deeper climate crisis is marked. The future of three of its major countries is at stake - the UN reports that beaches in Fiji once used for training are now being swallowed up by the ocean. The culture of Pacific Island rugby is at risk of sinking under rising tides and increasingly severe storms. The response from global authorities to this has been weak and slow. World Rugby recently signed up to a global sustainability charter yet has been lamentably quiet on the climate crisis".²

This raises the issue of loss and damage and the extent to which many nations like the those in the Pacific islands face an existential threat. There is need to speak out more about this outcome of the climate crisis. Christian Aid has therefore intentionally chosen to make this a significant area of concern in its climate crisis discourse. This brief seeks to bring forward a theological view on Loss and Damage. It does not suppose to lay out a theology on the subject but rather to offer that theological perspective and present us with our responsibility to creation care.

The biblical account of creation fronts this association, where creation has been assigned a relationship with mankind and vice versa with the promise of flourishing and fruitfulness. Regretfully, the conversation has today been dominated by the abuse of creation and hence the abuse of that relationship by humans. When one sees us as made in the image of God, and sees creation as the handiwork and expression of God, it may very well be seen that in abusing our relationship with creation we are also abusing our relationship with God. It is a perspective that should make us ponder afresh on this.

Regardless of that, the mandate remains. Genesis 1 reminds us that there is something extremely important that God cares deeply about when people are engaged with all of God's creation and are serving as God's image bearers ... allowing creation to flourish, and within that humankind to flourish as well as they carry out this call to care for God's world.³

Creation in Crisis

² https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/World-in-disunion-climate-change-and-the-Rugby-World-Cup_0.pdf

³ Dr Andrew Abernathy <https://thirdmill.org/answers/answer.asp/file/44467>



The likely reference from that point when talking about the environment and creation is the groaning for liberation. From whose chains or clutches does creation seek to be liberated. It is uncontested that creation seeks liberation from the ones appointed as stewards, whose hearts have been corrupted and undertaken a path deviant from the stewardship mandate given by God. And in creation seeking that liberation, it has also hit back with the climate crisis that has gripped the planet today. The sense of loss and damage to the environment in that lashing back is worrying. And now it is human beings who are groaning in return. “More than half of the population of the Philippines live in disaster-prone areas, and the country is now considered the third most vulnerable in the world to natural disasters and climate change. Twenty of its largest cities are situated on the coast and are at risk of rising sea levels and extreme climate conditions. Between 1990 and 2006, damages caused by disasters in the Philippines amounted on average to roughly 0.5 per cent of annual gross domestic product per year. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has noted: ‘In a future warmer world, there is a high likelihood of more frequent heavy precipitation events and more intense tropical cyclones.’⁴

Loss and Damage

Because of the above, countries have increasingly focused on the question of how to address the effects of climate disasters and consequences. “The phrase “loss and damage” can refer to permanent loss or repairable damage caused by the manifestations of climate change, including both severe weather events and slow-onset events, such as sea level rise and desertification. It can also refer to economic or noneconomic harm, such as loss of life, livelihoods, ecosystems, or cultural heritage.”⁵ But we also recognise that Loss and Damage is a failure of humans.

A failure of our Biblical mandate – Stewardship

Judeo-Christian values have been hailed as being critical in the spurring of successful economic models and work ethic, especially in what is considered the Western world. Value for work and a sure reward for one’s labour are important components to this. Most critical may be that the soul of mankind is in a crisis.

⁴ <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-08/time-for-climate-justice-11-loss-damage-protecting-most-vulnerable-october-2013.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-meaning-of-loss-and-damage-in-the-international-climate-negotiations/>



We have been lured by what Walter Brueggemann would describe as Pharaoh's narrative where production is key and where we need to produce more bricks at all costs. This drive for production has occasioned the need for cheap labour, which has seen many Western companies outsource factories in poorer countries. Brueggemann says, "It is entirely possible that slavery was instituted because of Pharaoh's desire for cheap labour. Indeed we may set it down as a truism that where there is *great wealth*, like that of Pharaoh, we will find this type of exploitation of labour makes surplus wealth possible".⁶ It has also occasioned the need for more natural resources to be used up, and for mankind to reach deeper within the earth's surface. In the process, mankind has also been sending up more and more harmful substances into the atmosphere. The environment has been scarred beneath and suffocated above. We need to review our orientation, yet "Judeo-Christian values do not require a new logic for economics but instead, an enriched view of the human person that widens the scope of self – interested behaviour to include the well-being of others".⁷

A failure of our Relationships

Loss and Damage is firstly a matter of justice. When fully considered, those living in poverty are more likely to experience Loss and Damage because they are less likely to be able to adapt to a given climate impact. They have neither adequate tools nor resources to plan for climate crises, also considering that the challenges they face are often multi-dimensional. Yet at the same time, they are also far less responsible for contributing to climate change.

Loss and Damage is essentially then a recognition of human failing. It is what happens when climate change cannot be mitigated or adapted to. There have been several attempts at this, yet each high-level climate conference after another seems unable to actually meet the level of expectations, especially for the most affected nations who we mentioned have contributed least to the problem. Loss and Damage is an expression of humans further breaking creation, and of dislocating our relationships with each other. It could point to the possibility that we too have suffered a form of moral loss and damage.

⁶ <https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/thoughts-on-labor-day>

⁷ Barend A. de Vries, *Champions of the Poor: The Economic Consequences of Judeo-Christian Values* Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998, 318 pp.



Hope and Recovery

Loss and Damage by definition means that we are past the critical point of mitigation and adaptation. But it should not suggest a paralysis of intent and action. If indeed it is because of misunderstanding our role, hope should lie in reclaiming that role and actively seeking to live it out. We must continue with our efforts in mitigation and adaptation. This is what we could call repentance by seeking to right what is wrong. It can be viewed considering the Ephesians Chapter 4 Principle – putting off the old self and putting on the new; we stop what wrong we have been doing and start doing what is right. If as someone said, the next best time to plant a tree is now, equally the next best time to change course and do the right thing is now.

Yet sometimes those in the development sector start with the change we want to see, when we could also meet people where they are and still end up with some positive results for change. There is a tension between seeking to act with the urgency mandated by an emergency and the acting in ways which enhances rather than damages our human relationships. Those are opportunities that can be explored further as an alternative to confrontational approaches. When David was confronted by Nathan the prophet after the murder of Bathsheba's husband, "We are told that David repented, perhaps because here the prophetic voice created another narrative that allowed the one at fault a moment of recognition of the abuse and, additionally, the space to re-orientate themselves for change and transformation. Our tendency to polarise the rights and wrongs of situations or conflict often reinforces positions of denial or defiance. *"There is no place in the public square where failure can be faced". (Walter Brueggemann)* The challenge is to recognise where metaphor, imagination and creativity can release energy to alter reality".⁸

We need to raise the STOP sign with conviction. The statistics and the data are often pessimistic especially about our trajectory towards the 1.5 pre-industrial level global warming mark. We must believe that our generation can be a change agent for the climate. When Jesus said, "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest,"⁹ it was not because all things were in place for a change of human hearts. On the contrary, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless,

⁸ Sue Richardson and Bob Kikuyu. Christian Aid and the Prophetic Voice (An Internal Document for Christian Aid)

⁹ John 4: 35, New International Version



like sheep without a shepherd"¹⁰. It is probably in time of greatest threat that we may have the greatest opportunity

This may call for saying things softly and saying them loudly. It may also call for saying these things symbolically such as the prophets did to draw the attention of the people to the crises they encountered. We need to be creative and prayerful in how we go about those prophetic actions. In Jeremiah 19 we read how God wanted to pass on a strong message to the people of Topheth. Jeremiah the prophet was sent with a clay jar which he was to smash in front of the people to symbolise what would happen to the nation for forsaking God their Redeemer and turning to false gods. It was both speech and action combined to powerful effect. We have limits. The planet has limits. And sometimes we must go beyond the limits of daily speech and communication to demonstrate the severity of the climate crisis. For as long as we are able, we must hold on to hope and demonstrate our hope with action.

Considering Justice

Loss and Damage means an almost irreversible turn for the worse to many who are already in poverty. One annual crop or a herd of cattle wiped out by drought may take several years for a subsistence farmer and his or her family to recover. What would reparative justice look like for someone who has lost their land, home, or livelihood? What can we do beyond this to heal our relationships with creation and with each other?

Restitution toward the Environment

We have taken so much from the land that it feels natural for us to continue hacking away at virgin forest land to make room for more arable land. It all sounds justified when populations are increasing and the demand for food is multiplying. But it is important to keep hearing the importance of the environment and the need for balance in the ecosystem which if lost, an important part of creation is lost. We should therefore consider restitution to the environment, giving back to it as it has given to us. It is possible given the right understanding as seen in the following example:

"Kenya has surpassed the 2022 minimum target of 10 per cent tree cover to achieve 12.13 per cent. It has also achieved an 8.83 per cent forest cover. In 2013, the forest cover was at 6.99 per cent while in 2018 it was 5.99 percent. This

¹⁰ Matthew 9: 36, New International Version



is according to the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) in its new National Forest Assessment Report 2021 released yesterday. The Kenya Vision [2030 blueprint set a goal](#) for the country to increase the area under forest to 10 percent by 2030 and sustainably manage natural forests for environmental protection and enhanced economic growth.”¹¹

Reparations for Affected People

Reparations have always been a sensitive matter. Determining the orientation for such a conversation is often difficult. Successful guidelines are few and far between. But there must nevertheless be some form of reparations for affected people when talking about Loss and Damage. The details of these can be and have been explored fairly in other settings. However, for our purpose here reparations can be more than people returning what has wrongfully been acquired. It can be the return of relationships that have previously caused injury and injustice between communities. Reparations can herald a repentance. This is possible when we have a just view of all people, even the ones on the obviously wrong side of the line, and the dignity and potential they hold being made in the image of God.

Reconciliation is critical in Loss and Damage

Most people would consider the logical outcome of Loss and Damage to be the due recompense for those in negative balance – a winner takes it all conclusion to the contest that in a sense acknowledges the harm done to affected communities. Indeed, those who have been the most affected and have been the least complicit in the climate crisis are justified to expect so. Yet the conversation on compensation often gets stuck because there seems to be no agreement for who takes responsibility and for how much. Justice is delayed in the back and forth as lives continue to be affected in the ongoing climate crisis. But there can be more than that. A theological reflection around this would suggest that Loss and Damage needs to go beyond recompense and reparations. It needs to consider reconciliation for the enablement of just communities. It is then that we can speak of the redemptive actions of restitution and reparations.

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn over all creation.** ¹⁶For **in him all things were created:** things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,*

¹¹ <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001447088/kenya-makes-strides-in-tree-and-forest-cover>



*whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ **and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.**¹²*

When reconciliation is pursued, we can repair our relationships with fellow humans: We have said that Loss and Damage is a matter of justice, where some have not been considerate of others in their actions which have led to the climate crisis and subsequently Loss and Damage. Reconciliation gives us a pathway to the restoration of relationships. Reconciliation allows us to talk with each other and find ways and means in which the harm is acknowledged without cause for further division. But more than anything else, reconciliation opens the door for those aspiring just communities to walk in solidarity forward with the common goal of being reconciled with creation and healing with creation.

Through reconciliation we can renew our relationships with creation: It does not take away the need for restitution towards creation, but it builds on those efforts. If indeed creation is groaning and longing for liberation through being subjected to abuse by humans, then reconciliation should strive to bring a song to creation through the renewal of our relationship with it. A new relationship with creation should help us to see creation not apart from humans but together with humans. It is not about exploitation of the environment but how we work with and within the environment in a mutually beneficial way. In the same way that Jesus said of Zacchaeus “this man, too, is a son of Abraham, we can then say of creation “this creation, too, is the handiwork of God” and embrace it afresh.

The Christian Aid Report emits a sombre mood when it states that there is a possibility the great Pacific Island nations may soon be severely affected by the climate crisis that they may be unable to play rugby and produce more rugby greats from their homeland. “The onslaught Fiji, Samoa and Tonga face from climate change will make life on the islands increasingly difficult. More and more people will consider leaving the islands altogether, while those who are left will face ever-greater challenges from extreme weather, rising sea levels, salinated

¹² Coll 1: 15 – 18. New International Version



water supplies and the other consequences of climate change.¹³ Christian Aid seeks to spotlight the matter of Loss and Damage because it is a present reality. It is not a matter of setting ambitions. It is a matter of action, to attend to the present challenges as poor and vulnerable nations face increased risk. We provide this theological reflection to emphasise the gravity of the situation but also to suggest and inspire pathways that we can follow to mobilise people and resources in building just communities that will both mitigate against the climate crisis as well as seek justice for those on the sharp end of it.

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¹³ https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/World-in-disunion-climate-change-and-the-Rugby-World-Cup_0.pdf

