

A Theological Reflection on Loss and Damage

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Introduction

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.

Creation as a gift for human flourishing

The biblical account of creation describes a clear relationship between human and non-human creation. Regrettably, this relationship has been dominated by the abuse of creation 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.

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.[1]

Creation in crisis

More than half of the population of the Philippines lives in disaster-prone areas, and the country is now considered the third most vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change in the world. 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.'^[2] Because of these extreme weather events, countries have increasingly focused on the question of how to address the effects of climate disasters and consequences. 'The phrase "loss and damage" refers 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 also refers to economic or non-economic harm, such as loss of life, livelihoods, ecosystems, or cultural heritage.'^[3] Loss and Damage is caused by 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. 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.'^[4] It has also occasioned the need for more natural resources to be used up and for humans to reach deeper within the earth's surface. In the process, humans have also been sending up increasing amounts of 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.'^[5]



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 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 one high-level climate conference after another seems unable to actually meet the level of expectations, especially for the most affected nations who 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'.

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 of 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. We need to raise the STOP sign with conviction. The statistics and the data are often pessimistic especially about our trajectory towards the 1.5C pre-industrial level global warming mark. We must believe that our generation can be a change agent for the climate. It is probably in times of greatest threat that we may have the greatest opportunity. We need to be creative and prayerful in how we go about engaging these opportunities to speak and act prophetically.

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 for 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 through this has lost their land, home, or livelihood? What can we do beyond this to heal our relationships with creation and with each other?

Restitution towards 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 be aware of the need for balance in the ecosystem. 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.' 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.[6]

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. 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.

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. 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 with the common goal of being reconciled and healed 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 conclusion, this theological reflection emphasises the gravity of the current situation but also

suggests and inspires 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 most affected by it.

End Notes

[1] Dr Andrew Abernathy, <https://thirdmill.org/answers/answer.asp/file/44467>.

[2] www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-08/time-for-climate-justice-11-loss-damage-protecting-most-vulnerable-october-2013.pdf.

[3] www.americanprogress.org/article/the-meaning-of-loss-and-damage-in-the-international-climate-negotiations.

[4] [//churchanew.org/brueggemann/thoughts-on-labor-day](http://churchanew.org/brueggemann/thoughts-on-labor-day).

[5] De Vries, B.A. (1998) *Champions of the Poor: The Economic Consequences of Judeo-Christian Values*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

[6] www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001447088/kenya-makes-strides-in-tree-and-forest-cover.

