

## **CAN WE STOP PLANET EARTH FROM BURNING?**

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#### **A LESSON FROM THE UNITED STATES**

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 2015, an unprecedented lawsuit was filed against the federal government of the United States. It was filed by 21 young people, most below the age of 18 and one of whom was a native American. The lawsuit concerned a climate change complaint against President Obama and various federal agencies. The complaint stated that the federal government was violating the constitutional rights of the young generation by promoting the development and use of fossil fuels. The young plaintiffs were petitioning for a court order which would require the President to implement a national plan immediately; this plan would work towards the decrease of atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations to a safe level of 350 ppm (parts per million).

The lawsuit stated that the federal government knew already for decades that the burning of fossil fuels was causing global warming and the destabilization of the earth's climate system. Yet, in spite of this knowledge, it continued with the promotion and exploitation of fossil fuels and was responsible for an **increase** in global warming to unsafe levels.

A co-plaintiff in the case was the famous NASA scientist, Dr. James Hansen; his granddaughter was part of the young people filing the lawsuit. Dr. Hansen has been called the "pioneer of modern climate science" and, together with 17 other scientists, last year presented evidence that "a feedback cycle between the oceans and ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland might have already jump-started an exponential surge of sea level." His estimate was between 2 to 5 meters by the end of the century, much faster than mainstream science has so far predicted." ([http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/2016/03/22/james\\_hansen\\_sea\\_level\\_rise\\_climate\\_warning\\_passes\\_peer\\_review.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/03/22/james_hansen_sea_level_rise_climate_warning_passes_peer_review.html)). Scientists have called this possibility 'terrifying.'

#### **WHAT LESSONS CAN WE, IN KENYA, LEARN FROM THE FOREGOING?**

First: that a government's policies may be guided by considerations other than the welfare of its citizens. The fact that for decades the U.S. government hid the consequences of fossil fuel burning from the nation and from the rest of the world had one goal only: to please the huge petroleum lobby. As reported by the Union of Concerned Scientists in July 2015, the world's six largest oil companies "were fully aware of the reality

of climate change but continued to spend tens of millions of dollars to promote contrarian arguments they knew to be wrong ... [They] have intentionally tried to deceive the public about the serious threat posed by climate change." (<http://www.ucsusa.org/publications/got-science/2015/got-science-july-2015#.V3EmwtR94sY>)

Second: that one country's decisions may cause irreparable harm to the world as a whole. This deception by six major oil companies is the main reason why it took the world so long for an agreement to be reached to finally do something to mitigate the effects of climate change. It is only last year (December 2015) in Paris that the text of a climate agreement, known as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was accepted by most of the world's nations. Yet this Agreement may have come too late. In spite of it having been considered a historic breakthrough, Dr. James Hansen has called it a fraud. A study of the document and of what has happened and what has not happened since it was signed by 178 countries in April this year will shed some light on the deficiencies of the Agreement.

Third: the need for 'eternal vigilance' on the part of a country's citizens. The deception on the part of the world's major oil companies was caused by nothing else than greed and a total disregard for the planet's welfare. A future generation may have cause to curse us for keeping quiet when we should have spoken up.

#### **WHAT SHOULD HAVE HAPPENED AND HAS NOT HAPPENED**

Eleven years ago an environmental activist from the UK, George Monbiot, published a book entitled *Heat: how to stop the planet burning* (U.K. Penguin, 2006). In this book Monbiot advocated the replacement of petrol-powered cars by electric vehicles and the rationing of air travel because of the undeniable fact of global warming caused by the emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

But have we seen any measures like those advocated by Monbiot happening in Kenya? On the contrary, what we **have** seen in our country is a sharp **increase** in the number of vehicles on the road, not a few of them fuel-guzzling. This has happened to the extent that in Nairobi there is often a gridlock causing severe deterioration of our environment. Our national carrier, Kenya Airways, boasts of the fact that it now flies to more destinations than ever before. Within the country the number of

flights to places like Mombasa and Kisumu has increased drastically. What does this tell us?

The message is clear. Like other poor countries chasing the ever illusive liberal capitalist dream of primitive accumulation of wealth by a few at the expense of the masses, Kenya is willing to sacrifice the welfare of her citizens in the present moment and in generations to come, at the altar of 'development' which is euphemism for self aggrandizement, wanton destruction and waste of natural resources without any care whatsoever of the grave repercussions to our environment.

Do we watch with our hands folded as we wait to die quietly, or is there something we can do, each in his/her own small corner? Remember, it is this continent and Kenya in particular that gave the world the paradigm of the 'little humming bird.' Can we become a 'walking nation' where people are encouraged to walk rather than drive to destinations less than 5 km away? Can families in the same neighborhood pool transport instead of using individual cars? Can the government levy higher taxes on air transport, including slapping hefty import duty on imported goods? The list could go on ad infinitum.

### **For further reading/viewing on this topic:**

#### **RESOURCES ON CLIMATE CHANGE – WHAT WE MUST DO**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcwniis\\_Zm8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcwniis_Zm8)

**Do the math:** a short video explaining why it takes many times more in global damage and destruction than it does to change toward zero tolerance for fossil fuels.

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Grand promises of Paris climate deal undermined by squalid retrenchments / George Monbiot

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2015/dec/12/paris-climate-deal-governments-fossil-fuels>

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**<https://350.org/about/what-we-do/>**

The number 350 means climate safety: to preserve a livable planet, scientists tell us we must reduce the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere from its current level of 400 parts per million to below 350 ppm.

We believe that a global grassroots movement can hold our leaders accountable to the realities of science and the principles of justice. That movement is rising from the bottom up all over the world, and is uniting to create the solutions that will ensure a better future for all.

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<http://gofossilfree.org/african-catholic-groups-call-pope-francis-to-support-the-divestment-movement/>

Jossi Cadan – 2015.12/09. African Catholic groups call Pope Francis to support the divestment movement