

CLIMATE CHANGE: A PUSH FACTOR FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Introduction

There seems to be a correlation between climate change, consumerism and human trafficking. The victims of climate change, having lost their livelihoods, are the number one target of traffickers. Long-term changes in the planet's climatic system render vulnerable local communities already threatened by a consumeristic society that rides on the principle of supply and demand. Unchecked constant human gratification and marathons for cheap goods and services favour trafficking in persons. Throughout Mother Earth's history, the climate has continuously changed. If climate change existed from time immemorial, why does it matter today? The present reflection intends to briefly explore the following points: defining concepts, the principle of supply and demand, threats of a consumeristic culture, rituals for wealth and power, International Law and human trafficking, and the Church response.

1. Defining concepts: climate change, consumerism and human trafficking

Climate change is a global issue. It denotes significant variations in the average conditions of temperatures and rainfalls in a region over a long period.¹ It refers to a « Natural large-scale and long-term change in the Earth's climatic system, as brought about by ice ages.» It is also a « Rapid, large-scale, and long-term change in the Earth's climatic system produced by global warming ». There are two types of climate change: natural and anthropogenic. The former pertains to the normal changes that the Earth goes through, while the latter finds its origin in the influence of human activity on nature such as the burning of fossil fuels, agriculture, deforestation, etc.

The cause of current climate change is largely human activity, such as the burning of fossil fuels, as natural gas, oil, and coal. The burning of these materials releases greenhouse gases into the Earth's atmosphere. There, these gases trap heat from the sun's rays inside the atmosphere causing the Earth's average temperature to rise. This rise in the planet's temperature is called global warming. The warming of the planet impacts local and regional climates. Throughout Earth's history, the climate has been steadily changing. When it occurs naturally, it is a slow process that has taken place over hundreds and thousands of years.²

Global warming is making weather more extreme, bringing about longer droughts and heat waves. The increase in the planet's temperature is making the ice melt, which makes the sea level rise, causing floods. The loss of soil moisture and high temperatures during drought increase the risk of wildfires. All these make life difficult not only for humans but also for other animals. Farms and crops used to feed the population are destroyed, threatening people's livelihoods and food security. The high temperatures both on land and in oceans have negative impacts on various ecosystems, making humans and other animals migrate for survival. Human mobility makes people vulnerable. In their search

¹ Cf. NASA, «A Guide to Climate Change for Kids».

² NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, «Climate Change».

for survival, they end up doing undignified jobs, exploited, both in the public and private sectors. It is the same exploitation that Jasmine O'Connor highlights arguing that

Climate change and modern slavery are inextricably linked. As climate change threatens the very foundations of our society, we are beginning to see that the heightened vulnerabilities that people experience as they are faced with losing their livelihoods and contemplating migration are making them even more at risk of exploitation.³

Consumerism is described as «An economic theory that increased consumption is beneficial to a nation's economy in the long run.» It is an exaggerated attachment to material possessions. However, consuming more than what is needed leads to an excess of waste, human exploitation and pollution. It brings about negative consequences for the environment, habitat destruction, water and air pollution, and in the long run, hasten climate change.

Climate change keeps people trapped in poverty and vulnerable to human traffickers. Human trafficking is a criminal activity by which men, women and children « are recruited, harboured, transported, bought, or kidnapped to serve an exploitative purpose, such as sexual slavery, forced labour, or child soldiery ». It turns the human person into a commodity, a product to be bought and sold for various purposes.

The Palermo Protocol defines human trafficking as follows:

"Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.⁴

To fight against this man-made disaster, applying the Law is important. There is also a need for rigorous control of labour and supply chains to fight against human exploitation.

2. The principle of supply and demand

This principle is « a capitalistic model of price determination in a market, according to which, holding all else equal in a competitive market, the unit price for a particular good will eventually settle at a point where the quantity demanded will equal the quantity supplied. » All that being said, in a consumeristic society, often, demand surpasses supply. Thus, a need to always increase the supply which entails much labour force, skilled and

³ J. O'CONNOR, «Climate Change and Modern Slavery: The Nexus that Cannot Be Ignored».

⁴ UNITED NATIONS (UN), «Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime», Art.3.a.

unskilled alike, to increase production for maximum profit. And cheap labour force can only be found through human exploitation.

Increasing supply pushes producers to look for labour force – cheap labour force for that matter – sought at all costs. This is one of the reasons why contemporary society is faced with human trafficking. As earlier mentioned, human beings are trafficked for various reasons: sexual exploitation, forced labour, child soldiery, etc. Worldwide, about 50 million people are victims of modern slavery (according to the 2022 Report of the Migration Data Portal). The statistics of the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC), show that « An estimated 6.04 million individuals are enslaved in sub-Saharan Africa, making up 12% of the total global enslaved population. An estimated 7 million individuals are enslaved in all of Africa, making up 14% of the total global enslaved population.»⁵

The consumer's exaggerated appetites – « instant gratification and commercial sex » – make human trafficking thrive. As stated above, whenever the level of demand increases, it pushes the industries of gratification to increase their supply level. With COVID-19 lockdowns, most of the things became «e-things»,⁶ as remarked by Klaus and Thierry. Human instant gratification also, I argue, became "e-human instant gratification". Modern e-commerce makes such a form of gratification thrive. It is believed that «The rise of e-commerce has also led to an increase in electronic waste. As more people purchase electronics online, the disposal of old electronic devices becomes a growing problem.»⁷ How is electronic waste managed? Such waste is another threat to the natural environment.

3. Threats of a consumeristic culture

One among the few who have noticed the dangers of consumerism is Pope Francis. He sees consumerism to be « a virus that attacks the faith». He said this while addressing the Congolese community on December 1, 2019. The wisdom contained in his address to the Congolese Chaplaincy can be traced back to his encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015). A quick survey of some sections of LS (§§ 5, 32, 106, 108-109, 113, 123, 178, 190 and 195) demonstrates the way consumerism is a cankerworm in contemporary society.

Anthropogenic climate change is closely related to consumerism that continues to deplete natural resources for immediate gratification. Quoting Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis reiterates that « human beings frequently seem “to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption”.» (LS, 5). In the same vein, the Holy Father reminds us that

The earth's resources are also being plundered because of short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production. The loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species which may

⁵ ASEC, «Human Trafficking Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa (Infographic) | ASEC-SLDI News».

⁶ KLAUS SCHWAB, THIERRY MALLIRET, «COVID-19: The Great Reset», 62.

⁷ C. EARTH5R, «The Environmental Impact Of E-Commerce».

constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing disease and other uses. Different species contain genes which could be key resources in years ahead for meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems (LS, 32).

The message of LS is clear. We need to change now, for tomorrow will be late. The speed at which we humans are exploiting natural resources is affecting many lives, mostly in the Global South, i.e., Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean; Asia, Israel, Japan and South Korea excluded, and Oceania without Australia and New Zealand. The rich are becoming richer, while the poor are becoming poorer. What counts most is amassing wealth and property at all costs. Human life counts less or does not count at all. Humans are no longer treated "as *ends* in themselves, but merely as a means to an end." In other words, using humans as *mere means* is to involve them in an action to which they could not in principle consent. Thus, using them as objects to be exploited for all kinds of purposes, one of them being rituals for wealth and power.

4. Rituals for wealth and power

Another phenomenon linked to human trafficking is cultic human sacrifices for wealth and power. The quest for quick money and other forms of wealth, together with the search for political power and recognition make human trafficking prevail. Recently, it has been noticed that human beings are trafficked for ritual purposes. « Though trafficking often involves smuggling and border crossings, that is not always the case ».⁸ There exists another form of trafficking that happens "internally" that often goes unnoticed. Restaurants, bars and nightclubs, domestic and hotel housekeeping, brothels, etc., are areas that harbour traffickers, argues Mischa. Women and girls are lured to work in such places. The sad reality is that they end up in commercial sexual activities. Men are mostly trafficked for organ harvesting, etc. Others, due to occultic beliefs, are eventually used for ritual purposes. It is believed that this is the only way their traffickers can make easy quick money. The case of albinos who are kidnapped for rituals is a concrete example.

Various reasons that make people with albinism be trafficked. «Their bones, skin and internal organs are used for amulets or concoctions that some believe bring good fortune, health, wealth and even powers like flying to those who use them.»⁹ Pascal Durand, who did research in the Sukumaland of Tanzania, mentions that people in albinism are threatened species because their « hair 'attracts fish in large quantities' and their 'bones are also believed to strike gold in mines' ».¹⁰ He further argues that

The skin is white, most obviously distinguishing albino people from common folk and associating them with the white westerner's group (Wazungu) and with their respective wealth. Consequently, a white skin powder would have the capacity to call for wealth and prosperity according to the principle of contagious magic.¹¹

⁸ M. GERACOULIS, «The Not-So-Free Market».

⁹ M. DAGHAR, «Tanzanians Hard Hit by Trafficking in People with Albinism».

¹⁰ P. DURAND, «Albino Killings in Sukumaland: Study on a Shifting Cultural Paradigm», 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

5. International Law and human trafficking

Human trafficking is a criminal activity. Most countries have enacted Laws that combat it. However, it takes people of goodwill to have effective legal frameworks that prevent human trafficking, protect the survivors and prosecute traffickers. Two points to consider: protocols and controls in the labour chains play a crucial role. The **2000 UN Palermo Protocol** came in to reinforce the Law against human trafficking. Another aspect that needs attention is the area of labour and supply transparency. The Church can advocate for constant "checks and balances" within labour systems.

Referring to people trafficked for the removal of organs, Capron and Delmonico argue that the Palermo Protocol is violated when the means used to obtain consent « involve coercion, threats, or use of physical force, deception, or abuse of power or a position of vulnerability.»¹² It remains difficult to prove that an organ broker took advantage of the victim, argue Capron and Delmonico. Another phenomenon that may conceal the traffic of organs is voluntary organ harvesting. In Kenya, impoverished youth opt to sell their organs, mostly kidneys, in return for cash to begin a business.¹³

6. Church response: working with vulnerable individuals and communities

The option for the vulnerable is fundamental, I argue. One of the ways for the Gospel message to be more and more a source of consolation is to empower the vulnerable. Empowerment programs at the grassroots level are needed. The Church ought to be closer to vulnerable individuals and communities. She should continue raising awareness – inform, form and empower local communities – to face the challenges of climate change, consumerism and human trafficking.

Fighting against climate change demands solutions from two angles: from big solutions to daily small habits. Big solutions include advocacy and lobbying at the global level. For instance target and hold accountable systems that pollute more the planet, calling for the phasing out of burning fossil fuels and moving to renewable and greener energy such as solar, hydroelectric and wind energy; reducing emissions caused by industry and transportation by investing in greener technology, and desisting from the deforestation of land, investing in more space efficient agriculture, call for proper waste management, etc. Small things would include recycling, composting organic waste, eating more vegetables and fewer meat products, saving electricity, buying things that last longer or can be reused, etc.

To curb human trafficking, the 4Ps¹⁴ approach, i.e., prevention, protection and prosecution & partnership is key. Again,

[...] greater cooperation among Bishops Conferences, individual dioceses, religious congregations and Catholic organizations would make existing programmes targeting HT more effective and give rise to

¹² A.M. CAPRON – F.L. DELMONICO, «Preventing Trafficking in Organs for Transplantation», 8.

¹³ W. OKUMU, «Organ Harvesting Syndicates Prey on Kenya's Desperate Youth».

¹⁴ Cf. REFUGEES & MIGRANTS, «Pastoral Orientations on Human Trafficking», no.38.

new ones. Also helpful would be to work with other Christian churches and communities and collaborate with the followers of other religions.¹⁵

Other responses, mostly at the grassroots levels, can include providing support to survivors of human trafficking and promoting their reintegration into society.

Conclusion

This reflection is of the view that there is a correlation between climate change, consumerism and human trafficking. Climate change – the anthropogenic one – matters today because, first it is occurring «at a much faster rate»¹⁶ and scientists warn that, if care is not taken, it is going to speed up even more in the future; second, there seems to be no consolidated consensus to tackle its negative impacts on humans; third, human greed is destroying the planet, and this is a serious matter that needs attention.

Human-caused climate change threatens humans themselves and other ecosystems on the planet. Victims of climate change, in their vulnerability, easily fall prey to traffickers. Unchecked constant human gratification and marathons for cheap goods and services make human trafficking prosper. Cultic human sacrifices for wealth (easy and quick money) and power reveal the connection between the person's "invisible world" and human trafficking. The reality of spiritual beliefs that propel human trafficking calls for proper research.

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¹⁵ Ibid., no.40.

¹⁶ NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, «Climate Change».

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