

WN Editorial

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Climate, food systems and world health **The four horsemen ride again**

The cover of this issue of *WN* shows a vision of St John the Divine, from Revelation, the final book of the Christian New Testament. It is of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. These spectres represent conquest, war, famine, and death (including from plagues). They come to trample societies that have departed from ways of wisdom and, because of confusion, greed or stupidity, have ignored repeated warnings of disaster. Our cover, and our contributions on climate in this issue, [*commemorate our main author Tony McMichael*](#), who died on 25 September.

The Four Horsemen ride

The Horsemen ride again. We can see one as representing the plague of rocketing uncontrolled diabetes and obesity, which like all great epidemics are symptoms of sick societies. These are now superimposed on nutritional deficiencies and infectious diseases, still rampant, as a new UN statement says, in part because of 'inadequate commitment and leadership' and 'weak human and institutional capabilities'.

All four spectres represent the consequences of changed climate. Towards the end of last month citizens took to the streets in protest. At the same time Naomi Klein's book *This Changes Everything. Capitalism and the Climate* was published. [*In this issue of WN*](#), she explains why too many governments and citizens have been deaf to warnings of this vast threat:

The climate crisis hatched in our laps at a moment in history when political and social conditions were uniquely hostile to a problem of this nature and magnitude – that moment being the tail end of the go-go 80s, the blast-off point for the crusade to spread deregulated capitalism around the world. Climate change is a collective problem demanding collective action, the likes of which humanity has never actually accomplished. Yet it entered mainstream consciousness in the midst of an ideological war being waged on the very idea of the collective sphere.

Use of a neutral-sounding term is part of the problem. 'Climate change' is not a natural phenomenon. It refers to what independent researchers collectively agree are

the probable disastrous and irreversible consequences of accelerating exploitation of natural including non-renewable resources in the name of ‘development’ and ‘growth’. These are expressions of the exploitative political and economic policy of most powerful governments, manifested above all by vast transnational corporations whose missions include constant expansion, and whose powers now can exceed and thwart those of nation states. As a consequence, the planet is overheating. The living world, including the human species, is in deep trouble. Naomi Klein continues:

Corporate power was ascendant at the very moment when we needed to exert unprecedented controls over corporate behaviour in order to protect life on Earth... Regulation was a dirty word just when we needed those powers most. It has meant that we are ruled by a class of politicians who know only how to dismantle and starve public institutions just when these most need to be fortified and re-imagined. It has meant that we are saddled with an apparatus of ‘free trade’ deals that tie the hands of policymakers just when they need maximum flexibility to achieve a massive energy transition.

Impact on food systems and world health

Change of climate is not only about devastating storms, melting ice-caps, looting of sources of non-renewable energy, and killer infections mostly clustered in the tropics. Richard Smith, once editor of the *British Medical Journal*, explains:

Until comparatively recently we talked mostly about infections like malaria, dengue fever, and schistosomiasis extending their range and high death rates during heat waves. Now we realise that much more death and suffering will come from hunger, drought, flooding, mass migration, and war.

As stated [earlier this year in WN](#), the Intergovernmental Commission on Climate Change has reframed climate change as above all a global issue of food and nutrition security. Jim Yong Kim, the president of the World Bank, and Ban Ki-Moon, the secretary general of the United Nations, agree that the most profound disturbances caused by climate change will – and do – damage food systems and world health. Just how much, remains to be seen. Jim Yong Kim foresees e-networked and thus amplified outrage against blatant outrageous injustice and inequity. He states:

Fights over water and food are going to be the most significant direct impacts of climate change in the next five to ten years. There's just no question about it.

The lives of materially privileged people have not yet changed much. Materially impoverished people are already suffering. Tony McMichael, regarded by the World Health Organization as ‘the guru on climate and health’, summarised the situation and the prospects, in his inaugural address as a member of the US National Academy of Sciences, excerpts of which we publish [this month](#):

Climate change poses threats to human health, safety, and survival via weather extremes and climatic impacts on food yields, fresh water, infectious diseases, conflict, and displacement. Paradoxically, these risks to health are neither widely nor fully recognised.

He continued:

Long-term climate changes have often destabilized civilizations, typically via food shortages, consequent hunger, disease, and unrest. Medium-term climatic adversity has frequently caused similar health, social, and sometimes political consequences. Infectious disease epidemics have often occurred in association with briefer episodes of temperature shifts, food shortages, impoverishment, and social disruption... The drought-famine-starvation nexus has been the main, recurring, serious threat to health. Warming this century is likely to greatly exceed the Holocene's natural... temperature fluctuations and to occur faster... Models project an increased geographic range and severity of droughts.

He concluded:

Modern societies, although larger, better resourced, and more interconnected than past societies, are less flexible, more infrastructure-dependent, densely populated, and hence are vulnerable.

Human societies have indeed been here before. But there are few signs that politicians and their advisors care or know about history. The 'market economy', a term that sounds vaguely nice, actually is the new version of the 'red in tooth and claw' *laissez-faire* crude, violent and reckless form of global capitalism which in the 19th century ravaged Asia, Africa and Latin America, causing mass destitution, famine and disease. In Europe at that period, precipitate industrialisation created alienation and hatred between new classes of super-rich and immiserated poor, causing riots and revolutions which cascaded into wars.

Decisions and actions taken by governments and UN and other international agencies that really would improve world health and well-being, need to be informed by the past and make provision for the future. But as Naomi Klein says:

Ours is a culture of the perpetual present, one that deliberately severs itself from the past that created us as well as the future we are shaping with our actions. Climate change is about how what we did generations in the past will inescapably affect not just the present, but generations in the future.

Dominant governments, and therefore international institutions, still will not or cannot face one fact that confronts everybody. This is that the prevailing political and economic system known as 'neo-liberalism', another innocuous-sounding term, introduced in or forced on most countries since the 1980s, is now proved to be a catastrophe even in its own terms, as the continuing global finance crisis shows.

One symptom of this vast mess is rising and fluctuating prices of staple foods, now the prey of [commodity speculators](#) taking advantage of scarcity caused by drought. Futures dealers know or care nothing about the livelihoods of farmers whose families depend on stable incomes, or of communities who need access to adequate nourishing food. This means more food and nutrition insecurity. It also causes rage. Uncontrolled food prices in a world whose rich people wallow in luxury, [is a trigger for riots, uprisings and wars](#). This is why Jim Yong Kim and Ban Ki-moon speak as they do.

Future food, nutrition and health

Next month the UN International Conference on Nutrition takes place. One of its outcomes will be a Framework for Action to be ratified by member states as a blueprint for global agriculture, food, nutrition and health policies and actions for the foreseeable future. Three drafts have been circulated. A summary of the comments of public interest organisations on the second draft was [*published in WN last month*](#):

The Framework is radically criticised as not addressing the political and economic drivers of agriculture, food and nutrition policies and practices in the world now. The strongest criticism comes from organisations that represent the interests of vulnerable populations and groups living in poverty, whose basic need is means to become sufficiently empowered and resourced... Instead, the Framework largely perpetuates the assumption that impoverished and otherwise disadvantaged populations need aid in the form of money, goods or interventions of types that by their nature are not sustainable or, worse, mystify or invalidate the people they are supposed to help.

The third and most recent draft of the Framework, circulated last month, carefully avoids engaging with the big issues. There is no mention of or reference to transnational food and drink product corporations. Instead, 'the private sector' is listed as a 'stakeholder' and as such a partner in policies and programmes meant to improve food security and world health. There is a vaguely gloomy reference to 'depletion of natural resources exacerbated by climate change'. And that is all.

Ban Ki-moon summarised the UN General Assembly summit on 23 September on an upbeat note. He invited governments, industry and civil society to work together, saying: 'We can avert these risks if we take bold, decisive action now'. An editorial in the UK newspaper *The Guardian* last month is also vague, saying: 'The science is rigorous, the political response must be vigorous'. But what forms would such 'decisive' and 'vigorous' action take? And if 'we' includes the leaders of the most powerful UN member states, where is the evidence of concerted action?

Before the summit, over half a million people in over 2,000 locations and 150 countries took to the streets – and countryside too – and demonstrated commitment to a world where climate is natural. What to do? Effective actions would not merely adjust the current world disorder. They would include enactment of agreements by the most powerful governments to abandon the political and economic ideology that has again unleashed global predatory capitalism. This must include new international laws, the modern equivalent of the trust-busting achieved in the US a century ago, that will strip the powers of transnational corporations and in so doing, protect and support ethical industry. It implies a whole new way of being in the world, in which the highest values are not of quantity but of quality. It means the end of money being the measure of value. It means demolition of the false god of incessant material growth. It means new leaders. Nothing less will do. Is this possible? It better had be.

The editors