

# The Big Issues

Information provided by Oxfam Community Aid Abroad

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## Environmental – Climate

The weather has always affected people's lives, particularly those that rely on farming – whether growing their own food, or growing crops to sell – to survive.

The earth's atmosphere has changed more in the last hundred years than it did for tens of thousands of years previously.

This phenomenon, called "climate change", is mainly due to excess greenhouse gases produced by human activities. These activities include industrial production, burning fossil fuels for energy, land clearing and some agricultural practices. They produce greenhouse gases – primarily carbon dioxide – which rise to earth's upper atmosphere. There they produce an effect like the glass in a greenhouse, which lets in the warmth of the sun, then traps it in the earth's atmosphere. The result is global warming – that is, increasing average temperatures.

The world's worst greenhouse polluters in terms of total emissions are the United States, Japan, Germany, the UK and Canada. Despite having only five percent of the world's population, the United States is responsible for almost 25 percent of total global greenhouse emissions. But if you look at how much we pollute per person, Australia is the second worst after the US. Per person, Australians pollute at twice the level of most European countries and many times that of our Asian neighbours. Australia's high emissions result from a high dependence on coal-fired power, very poor energy efficiency and excessive land clearing.

Global warming is already causing more severe storms and cyclones, droughts and floods, and is devastating the world's forests and other ecosystems. Rising sea levels are threatening not only island nations with flooding, but also heavily-populated coastal regions, while rising temperatures are causing increases in the rates of infectious and insect-borne diseases such as malaria.

> List some of the effects that global climate change might be having on countries in Africa. How do these contribute to the current famine situation?

- > Visit [www.greenhouse.gov.au/education](http://www.greenhouse.gov.au/education)  
This is the website of The Australian Greenhouse Office.
- Research some of the things that you can do to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- List five things that you can do every day at home to help.
- Can you think of any other ideas? Brainstorm a list in class of things your school does already and other things it could do to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

### Extension activities:

- > Develop a comprehensive strategy that the Australian government could take to deal with the impact of climate change and to reduce further change occurring.
- > The Tuvalu islands in the Pacific experienced four cyclones in 1941, an average year. In 1989, however, Tuvalu endured 21 tropical cyclones! Find out more about the impact of climate change on Tuvalu and other Pacific Islands. Write a briefing for the Australian government on how Australia can help.



Power station in the Hunter Valley. Picture Michele Mossop

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## Economic – Debt

Debt is one of the biggest issues holding back human development in southern Africa and throughout the developing world. Many heavily indebted countries now spend more money on debt repayments than on essential services such as health care or education.

All countries in the world borrow money from other governments, from commercial banks, or from financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the 1970s and 1980s, many poor countries were encouraged to borrow large amounts of money to build things like roads, bridges and airports.

Unfortunately, worldwide economic changes meant that many poor countries did not have enough money to pay back their loans.

In the 1990s, international campaigning resulted in some excellent progress on debt relief. A number of wealthy countries agreed to cut the debts owed to them by the world's poorest countries by 33 percent, which was later raised to 67 percent. However it soon became clear that many countries, including many in southern Africa, would still never be able to pay back their debts.

After further campaigning, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund came up with the HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries) Initiative. Under this initiative, all those owed money by poor countries would agree to reduce the debt burden of the worst-affected countries to what they called a "sustainable" level of 20 to 25 percent of their export earnings, providing they implemented certain economic reforms and weren't involved in conflict.

The HIPC Initiative has achieved some relief, but nowhere near enough. According to the World Bank/IMF definition, Angola's debt is supposedly "sustainable", yet in a country devastated by recently-ended conflict, with a life expectancy of under 40 and child mortality rates of almost one in five, can it be fair that every child born owes \$2000 to rich countries?

> What proportion of a government's budget do you think should be spent on health, education, defence, repaying debt? Design your own criteria for determining where resources should be spent. If you had \$100 to spend, how would you divide it and why?

Visit [www.jubilee2000.org.au](http://www.jubilee2000.org.au).

This is the website of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which is the international campaign for debt relief for poor countries.

>What has Australia done to provide debt relief?"

### Extension activities:

- > Visit [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)  
This is the website of the International Monetary Fund.
  - What do the seven countries affected by famine owe to the Fund?
  - What is the total of the debt owed by these countries?



Jubilee 2000, Drop the Debt campaign. Picture James Hawkins, provided by Oxfam Community Aid Abroad.

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## Economic – Trade

International trade is making more connections between people around the world every day. You are part of the international trade system every time you tie the laces on sneakers made in Indonesia, pull on a t-shirt made in China, eat rice from India or Thailand, fruit from the Pacific or sweets made with sugar from Africa or Europe.

Trade has the potential to help poor countries earn income, build wealth and fight poverty. Many poor countries are extremely economically dependent on exports, especially agricultural products and minerals, to earn income.

But often, the rules of international trade are unfair – skewed in favour of rich countries and powerful corporations. These are determined by powerful organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which are dominated by the world's wealthiest countries, including the United States and countries in Europe.

### Read the following case study:

Unfair trade rules are preventing Mozambique from reaping the rewards of its highly efficient sugar industry. After almost two decades of conflict, and the devastating floods in 2000, Mozambique has managed to get its sugar production back to pre-war levels. Thanks to massive government investment, its sugar cane industry now boasts the lowest production costs in the world.

But in spite of this, Mozambique is unable to compete in the world market. Why? Because the EU dumps thousands of tonnes of beet sugar on poor countries every year - sugar which has been produced with generous government subsidies, and which is sold in developing countries at less than half of what it cost to cultivate. This makes it almost impossible for poor countries to compete, even though they can produce sugar far more cheaply than is possible in Europe.

Mozambique's sugar industry is further depressed by prohibitive EU taxes (known as 'tariffs') on imports of processed foods. These tariffs lock countries like Mozambique into trading raw sugar, blocking them out of exporting processed sugar to Europe, which would be worth considerably more.

Meanwhile, European companies buy the cheap raw sugar for refining - and reap the financial rewards. If Mozambique was able to refine its own sugar, it could generate wealth and create thousands more jobs in the processing sector.

In 2001 Europe gave 170 million euros of emergency and development aid to Mozambique, including money to help "improve the lives of farming and rural communities". Yet these people would benefit far more if Europe traded freely and fairly.

### Questions:

- > Research the difference between sugar cane and sugar beet. Find out the cost of producing a tonne of sugar from sugar beet and from sugar cane? Evaluate the EU policy of subsidising farmers to grow sugar beet.
- > Visit [www.maketradefair.com](http://www.maketradefair.com)
  - What are government subsidies?
  - What are trade barriers?
  - Read some of the stories under the "real lives" link at the top of the page. Pick a story each to summarise to the class.
  - Find out about "the Big Noise", and play the Coffee Baron Game. What did it teach you about the world coffee industry? Name three famous people who have signed up to the Big Noise.

### Extension activities:

- > Visit [www.intracen.org/menus/countries](http://www.intracen.org/menus/countries)  
This is the website of the International Trade Centre, part of the World Trade Organisation.
  - Look at the tables for National Export Performance for some different countries: Australia, Southern African countries and some other countries you recognise. What are some of the top ranked exports for each of the countries?
  - Compare the difference in export value for the top ranked exports for a developed country and an undeveloped country which have similar populations.
  - Find out more about "fair trade". Where can you buy fair trade products in your community? How can you find out more about what is fairly traded, and what is not?

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## Political – Conflict

Armed conflict and other forms of political strife have been major underlying factors in causing poverty and hunger in several southern African nations. In recent years, most of the conflicts in southern Africa have been "civil" – that is, between different groups within one country, rather than between different nations.

During civil war, ordinary people are often forced to leave their homes and farms to find a safer place for their family. This means that they can no longer grow their own food. Nor can they earn money to buy food in the usual ways – for example, by selling their excess crops or working on other people's land for cash. This makes refugees and internally displaced people very vulnerable to poverty and hunger.

Often people seeking safety will end up in huge camps along with thousands of others. Those who end up in such places within their own country are called Internally Displaced People, or IDPs. Those who flee to neighbouring countries, and sometimes to countries much further away – like Australia – are called refugees. Worldwide there are more than 12 million people who are refugees, many of them children. There are more than six million people worldwide who are internally displaced within their own country. The United Nations estimates that there are approximately 3.3 million African refugees, around a third hosted by countries within southern Africa.

Conflicts can continue to cause poverty and hunger long after the guns have stopped firing. Often when people flee their homes to find safety elsewhere, they can take little with them but what they can carry. When the conflict is over and people can finally return to their home, they often have to start again from scratch, without herds or other assets that may have been built up over generations.

Another tragic consequence of civil conflict is landmines and unexploded ordnance. Long after wars end, landmines continue to maim and kill innocent people as they go about their daily lives. There are now an estimated 50 million landmines across nearly 70 countries worldwide. The mines kill or injure a new victim every 30 minutes – that is, 15-20,000 per year, mostly women and children in the world's poorest countries. Landmines cause greater poverty by stopping people from being able to use agricultural land or rebuild their communities, for fear of losing their lives. An international campaign to ban these terrible weapons resulted in the International Treaty

to Ban Landmines, which became international law on March 1, 1999.

- > Mines are still being produced and used in war. Find out more about landmines, including the international campaign to ban the mines. Which countries have signed up to the Mine Ban Treaty? Which have not?
- > Design a Landmines awareness poster.
- > Which countries take in the most refugees? What are the major reasons for people becoming refugees?
- > Imagine you and your family are refugees. What would you want to take with you? What would you leave behind? Write a story of how you would find somewhere safe to live.

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## Health – HIV/Aids

HIV/AIDS is one of the biggest underlying reasons for the current food crisis. In Africa, AIDS now kills ten times more people a year than war. The highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection in Africa are in the southern Africa region.

The primary way that the HIV virus is transmitted across Africa is through heterosexual contact. Infection rates in young African women are far higher than in young men. According to UNAIDS, the United Nations organisation working on HIV/AIDS, the average rates of HIV infection amongst teenage girls were over five times higher than in teenage boys.

The seven countries worst affected by HIV/AIDS in the world are in southern Africa: Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi, South Africa and Namibia. One in three adults living in Swaziland is infected with HIV/AIDS. One in four adults in Botswana and Zimbabwe is infected, while one in five is infected in Zambia and South Africa.

One of the main reasons that HIV has such a big impact on the food crisis is that infections are concentrated in people aged 15 to 49 years old. Most epidemics affect the elderly and children first of all, but HIV/AIDS is different. It has the highest infection rates amongst the most productive members of a community: those who work the land, look after livestock, operate machinery, or do other work outside the home to earn income for the family. In some areas, infection rates are up to more than 30 percent – almost one in three people – in the 15–49 age group.

The link between HIV/AIDS and the food crisis goes both ways. While HIV/AIDS makes communities more vulnerable to hunger, the current crisis is actually likely to worsen the epidemic. According to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), some of the ways that communities have previously coped with hard times may now be putting people in more danger of infection.

According to UNICEF, during a food crisis poor people in southern Africa will look for alternative ways to survive. This may include moving to other areas to find work, dropping out of school and taking up hazardous work to earn extra money. Young women in particular may have sexual relations with men who give them money or food to feed themselves or their families, increasing their risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

- > Read the article by Pamela Bone called "Hunger and AIDS take an unrelenting toll", *The Age*, 27 August 2002 at [www.education.theage.com.au](http://www.education.theage.com.au)
  - Most people in Australia will live until they are in their 70s or 80s. If this were reduced to 40, how would this affect your life plans and dreams?
  - Describe some actions that a community in southern Africa could take to promote health and prevent further HIV infection of adolescent girls and boys.



Suzanne (middle) is 14. She and her younger sisters were left to fend for themselves after their parents died of AIDS. Photo provided by Jerry Galea, provided by Oxfam Community Aid Abroad.