

Social Ethics

Questioning the system

By Nicola Holzapfel



Helping the hungry: The UN's Food Program provides food assistance to people in need. *Source: Thomas Myhoya/Reuters/Corbis*

"Market-based regulation cannot protect the interests of the weak," says Markus Vogt, Professor of Social Ethics at LMU. Here he considers the implications of globalization and climate change, and explores ways of reducing inequality.

At this very moment, over 800 million people don't have enough to eat. Over the next hour, and every hour after that, hundreds of children under the age of 5, most of them in Africa and Southeast Asia, will die – of hunger or from preventable illnesses. These figures, compiled by United Nations agencies, document the extent of poverty and destitution in the world, and highlight the divide between the countries of the Northern and Southern hemispheres. "World hunger is a case in point that underlines the need to redefine the ideals of solidarity and social justice in global terms," says Markus Vogt, who holds the Chair of Christian Social Ethics at LMU. "We actually have enough food – the European Union produces 30% more than it consumes. Paradoxically, that surplus is the cause of the problem, because with it we disrupt markets in the Southern hemisphere, deprive local farmers of the incentive to produce, and foster a culture of dependency. In some African countries, more than 70% of agricultural land is not under cultivation."

Markus Vogt studies the effects of globalization, technological change and global warming, investigates conflicts over resources and the highly unequal distribution of wealth and penury in the world. He sees it as the task of his discipline not

only to analyze problems, but to point to ways of solving them. For this reason, Vogt, who also heads the Study Group on Catholic Social Ethics, explores the status and applicability of concepts like justice and solidarity – he speaks of the "moral grammar" of these terms – in the context of modern conflicts. "If in my notion of solidarity people are viewed as passive consumers of aid, I make their situation worse." The goal should be to equip the deprived with the means to produce their own food, provide for their own livelihoods and preserve their cultural identity. "Selective solidarity, which is paternalistic, is not enough. Solidarity must be exercised at the structural level, and must tackle the injustices that lie at the root of deprivation."

Exploring the "moral grammar" of justice and solidarity

For Vogt, the "prevailing equity deficits" are most obvious in the area of climate policy. "Climate change hugely restricts opportunities for people in the disadvantaged South, for future generations everywhere and – if one may apply the concept of justice to nature as a whole – for the natural world itself," Vogt says. The Millennium Report issued by the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) revealed the extent to which the natural world is

under stress. One quarter of the world's arable land and more than one-third of our rainforests have already been destroyed. With reference to the immense scale of environmental damage, Klaus Töpfer, a former Director of the UNEP, once spoke of the "ecological aggression" of the Western world. A report issued by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development forecasts that between 150 million and one billion people will be forced to migrate during the next few decades, owing to climate-driven degradation of living conditions in their homelands.

Rampant urbanization and ecological devastation of natural habitats will add to the disruption. "Environmental degradation is already one of the primary causes of social deprivation," Vogt says. Over-exploitation and poverty are closely linked. "Reducing poverty is therefore the most effective way to mitigate climate change, for action against climate change in the disadvantaged countries of the South can only succeed if it is subjectively perceived as equitable and fair."

Unfortunately, he adds, competing concepts of justice hinder international efforts to confront the real problems. The concept of justice remains essential. It underlines the pressing need for a new

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world order that enables us to respond appropriately to conflict situations, but it is such a demanding aspiration that it can paralyze initiative. Different states interpret the idea in very different ways, and some equate it with egalitarianism.

The impact of this divergence can be seen in the negotiations on measures to mitigate climate change. The international community is pursuing a balanced settlement, but one based on “a very inadequate balance-sheet,” says Vogt. Some countries produce very little carbon dioxide (CO₂) because they are industrially underdeveloped. China’s emissions are rising, but the country manufactures goods for export. “We improve our CO₂ balance mainly by outsourcing CO₂-intensive production,” he says. Shouldn’t the resulting emissions be entered on our side of the ledger? Do countries that have been loading the atmosphere with CO₂ for the past 150 years have the right to demand that others reduce their emissions? Positive contributions to climate stabilization, such as forests or sustainable land management, are undervalued, he maintains. And as for the follow-on costs: “We use the atmosphere as a cheap garbage dump, and are now trying to internationalize the costs so as to minimize higher follow-on costs by means of climate protection measures. But I doubt that these costs can be accurately assessed. In our case, the financial costs are very high, because we are talking about insurable assets. In the South, human lives are at stake. And these people cannot bear such costs, because their own economic value is underestimated. How does one put a price on a human life?”

Vogt’s conclusion from all this clear-cut: “We cannot save the climate by repeating the mantra: ‘Global resources are declining, so we have to distribute

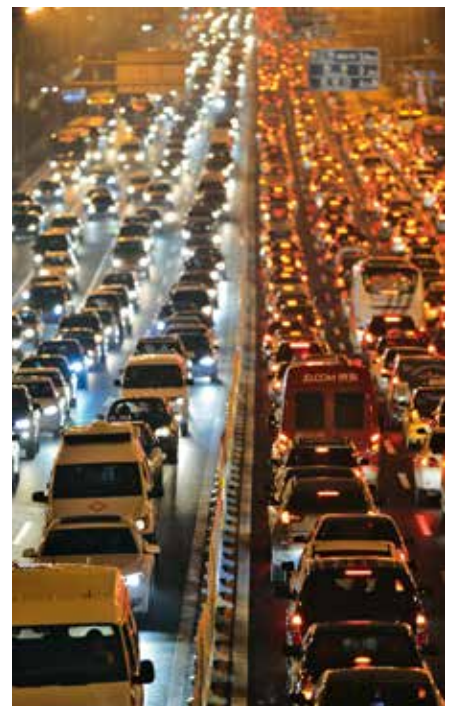
them differently.’ Our whole attitude to resources must change. The rest of the world strives to attain our levels of prosperity. Unless we change our ways, people in other countries will never accept restrictions on resource consumption.”

The ‘logic of always more’ shapes our ethical behavior

In its 1972 report “Limits to Growth”, the Club of Rome defined the notion of sustainability for the first time. The report pointed out that economic development must take account of ecological, social and cultural factors. Over 40 years later, the world economy has made little progress toward the goal of sustainable development. Even the target set out in the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change – to limit the global rise in temperature to 2°C – now seems out of reach.

Vogt argues that this is not the fault of the politicians alone. “It is also attributable to deficits in science and ethics.” Here, he points to a striking asymmetry: “Huge numbers of scientists are engaged in research on climate change, and have developed proposals for limiting its effects, but very little has been done to investigate how these ideas could be systematically implemented and what they would mean for the structure of our social order.” With a view to clarifying the problem of ‘How’ in relation to the foreseeable ethical conflicts, Vogt approaches the issue from an interdisciplinary perspective. He is now a Permanent Fellow at LMU’s Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, which looks at environmental issues from the perspective of the Humanities, and a member of the Working Group on Waste in the Environment and Society at the Center for Advanced Studies. In addition, he is actively involved in the

work of many church-based and social committees. “Politics can only work with what is already there,” Vogt says. “But climate change challenges the guiding principles and ways of life that our society embodies. What is at stake is our model of consumption, production and economic management, and our relationship to the natural world – and no conference decisions will transform these. Vogt speaks here of the “logic of ‘always more’”, which is inherent in our economic system and shapes our ethical behavior. “The notion of limits is foreign to this model, but perhaps it is time to incorporate the idea into our definition of progress. By asking ‘what do we want to be able to do?’ we can consciously restrict the range of options we consider.



Air pollution promotes global warming: Rush hour in Peking. “Unless we change our ways, people in other countries will never accept restrictions on resource consumption,” says Markus Vogt. Source: *Imaginechina/Corbis*



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And for Vogt, financial markets are the institution most obviously in need of such new thinking. "Our confidence in society's ability to control markets has been too complacent for too long. It is time to reverse the present surrender of responsibility for the fate of the world to the interests of international capital," he says. Indeed, taming financial markets would make a major contribution to mitigation of climate change, he says. "Financial markets follow the logic of a model of economic development based on extreme rates of growth, with little or no regard for social, cultural and ecological contexts. Mitigation of global warming has no place in this model." He also wholeheartedly supports proposals to use the proceeds from the planned international tax on finance transactions to help poorer countries to adapt to the effects of climate change. "This is the only financial resource in prospect which is of the right order of magnitude to enable necessary adaptation measures to be undertaken. Vogt anticipates massive transfer payments, which should be targeted to areas in which ecosystems are already under grave threat. But he also believes in the effectiveness of solidarity on smaller scales: "Solidarity need not be confined to the political level. Climate conferences that end in disagreement do not preclude bilateral aid for specific countries or changing unjust structures at regional levels, in Zambia, for instance, where nearly half of the population is undernourished."

World trade in staple foods also requires more effective regulation, Vogt asserts. "Speculation in foodstuffs is a huge problem and one of the basic causes of hunger, because it leads to sudden, steep increases in food prices. It brings immense profits for the speculators, but puts basic foods beyond the reach of the poor." The so-called "tortilla

crisis" was one such example: In 2007, impoverished Mexicans found themselves unable to pay for their most basic staple, maize. "Much tighter legal provisions with clearly defined categories of accountability are needed." Vogt proposes that some of the profits of speculation be devoted to food production.

Access to cropland has also become a battleground in this context. According to Land-Matrix, an initiative started by organizations involved in development policy, 3.7 million hectares of land, primarily in Africa, has been sold to international investors, usually to the detriment of the local population. "Those who had previously cultivated this land had no clear legal title to it and were evicted. Here we have a clash between different traditions and legal systems which leads to manifest injustice and bitter conflict," says Vogt.

Vogt invokes the idea of "the global common good"

To ensure that justice prevails, a stable legal and social framework is needed, says Vogt. "Justice requires that the weaker sectors of society, those whose interests are not reflected by market mechanisms, are protected. And these provisions must be enforceable – lack of enforcement is currently the biggest deficit." Vogt therefore argues for the creation of a World Environment Council with authority to impose sanctions, which could supervise the distribution of transfer payments necessary to mitigate climate change. And justice needs a dynamic component, to oversee transactional justice in markets that balance competing interests.

Vogt invokes the idea of "the global common good", which has recently emerged in discussions on how to further the

cause of justice around the world, and here he refers explicitly to Catholic social doctrines, citing Thomas Aquinas' dictum: The Creation is the common possession of all mankind. "The concept of the common good implies that we think of ourselves as a community. "Instead of mulling over how goods and rights should be distributed, we must accept that we are all in this together, that mankind is one family and shares a common fate." In conflicts concerning collective goods, the primacy of the right to decent living conditions implies that economic interests must give up the idea of an absolute right of ownership and learn to accord more weight to considerations of the common good with regard to the utilization of resources.

Indeed, the scale of global inequality is now beginning to make business leaders uneasy. Speakers at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2013 described the ever-growing gap between rich and poor as probably the greatest threat to the world economy. "They are afraid that growing income inequality, and the growing realization that this essentially a structural matter, will generate social unrest," says Vogt.

Fifteen years ago, the UN issued the Millennium Challenge, a list of specified development goals. One of them was to reduce the infant mortality rate by two-thirds by 2015, and the global rate of poverty by half. "The Millennium Challenge is regarded as a qualified success, at least with respect to what can be quantified, says Vogt. "But the list addresses symptoms rather than causes, because the goals are defined in quantitative terms, and quality – of education, for example – is not taken into account." Nevertheless he supports efforts to transfer this idea to the debate on sustainability, so as to set attainable targets and provide



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the medium-term timeline with which politicians are more comfortable.

However, he says, the Millennium Goals suffer from a systematic design flaw: "We may now be in the process of propagating our Western lifestyle and economic model around the globe in the name of humanity, social justice and the fight against poverty. But it is this very model of prosperity that is responsible for the fact that our planet is approaching the limits of its resilience."

Do we still have the time to keep climate change within tolerable limits? "It seems likely to me," Vogt says, "that we will in the foreseeable future enter a zone in which tipping points come into play. It is a sober assessment, but it implies the onset of catastrophic scenarios that rival those in science-fiction movies. Large-scale inland migrations from the low-lying coasts of Canada and Siberia, with concomitant conflicts over resources, are among them. On a more optimistic note, Vogt adds: "History is full of surprises, and human nature is characterized by the capacity to draw strength from adversity." As a member

of the interdisciplinary research network *Forchange*, he also studies how societies manage to surmount crises and what sustains their capacity to react in such situations.

One of the more controversial approaches to dealing with the crisis is so-called geoengineering – technologies that promise to neutralize the effects of carbon emissions by binding and storing CO₂ in suitable geological depositories. "Geoengineering opens up wholly new possibilities. But there is a danger that we will focus on utopian technological fixes instead of developing a readiness to accept limits," Vogt says. "I believe

that we are heading for a radical transformation process. Man's needs know no natural limits. How we can best adapt our notions of human development and humane behavior in the light of continuing population growth is a difficult question to answer. There is no agreement on what constitutes quality of life. So far, we have tried to compensate for this lack by saying that each of us must find what's right for him, with society's role being to provide as many opportunities for personal development as possible. But the logic of 'always more', which is inherent in this model, cannot be sustained for evermore."

Translation: Paul Hardy



Prof. Dr. Markus Vogt

Has held the Chair of Christian Social Ethics at LMU since 2007. Born in 1962, Vogt studied Theology and Philosophy in Munich and Jerusalem. He then worked as a researcher for the Advisory Council to the Federal Government on Environmental Affairs, and in 1998 was named Professor of Christian Social Ethics at the Salesian College of Philosophy and Theology in Benediktbeuern. From 2000 to 2007 he headed the Council of European Bishops' Conferences Environmental Committee. He is also a member of several other academic and ecclesiastical bodies.

