
EMBARGOED 8pm 02 June 2011

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

TASC Annual Lecture 2 June 2011

Royal College of Physicians

Justice for All – Even in Climate?

Linking the Local and the Global

Mary Robinson

I am very happy with the timing of my talk to TASC this evening. A lot has changed in Ireland over a very short period which should encourage you in your work and before addressing my major topic I would like to briefly reflect on this. A successful State visit by Queen Elizabeth II brought to a new level relations between Britain and Ireland. This was emphasised by the words of An Taoiseach and Prime Minister Cameron who spoke of a new way forward with emphasis on trade and cultural relations.

Meanwhile, the death of Dr Garret FitzGerald during the State visit gave a much deeper context to what was being brought to fruition as we were reminded of the contribution he made over many years towards peace in

Northern Ireland and to necessary changes in this part of the island to make it more inclusive and fairer.

Finally, there was the inspirational address by President Obama, reminding us ‘Is Féidir Linn’!

All of these events together have changed the public mood and lifted our collective morale. There is a sense of pride that the public events went so well, and showed that Ireland can hold its own on important occasions of national and international significance. At a deeper level, I believe there has been a period of introspection by Irish people from all walks of life-reflecting on the images of the State visit, the speeches by President McAleese and the Queen and by President Obama, and above all, pondering the many tributes to and accounts of the life and values of Garret FitzGerald.

Countries do go through moods or fashions of the time. When I was elected President in December 1990, the mood was one of local self-development, the spirit of meitheal in towns and villages and parishes. We were becoming more prosperous and welcomed the inward investment and return of talented Irish people who could contribute to our economic development. Sadly a short time later many were caught up in the hubris and greed of the Celtic Tiger period, where the excesses of a relatively small number in banking and property development brought the country to its knees. Since then – and until the last few weeks - we have tried to cope, filled with seething anger and quiet despair, combined with a sense of humiliation about the loss of our economic sovereignty.

None of the grim economic realities have changed. But the public mood is capable of having a life of its own, and helping us to change our circumstances in a more positive way. The values that guided Garret

FitzGerald throughout his life are fashionable again, and instructive to young people who had become cynical and disillusioned. In a number of articles in recent years, Garret was criticising the inequality and unfairness of our taxation system and the funding of education.

This is the agenda that TASC has been committed to: the pursuit of equality – economic, social and environmental – in its vision of a better future for Ireland. Recent events have propelled us in this direction and provided us with an opportunity which must not be missed. We should take to heart the recent critical report on Ireland of the UN’s independent expert on human rights and extreme poverty, Dr Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona. The report criticises the Irish Government for seeking to reduce the budget deficit by imposing deep cuts in public spending while maintaining a low tax regime, as these are likely to have a major impact on the most vulnerable in society. Dr Carmona also calls on EU states to reduce the interest rate charged on Ireland’s EU IMF loan. She notes that cuts to the Human Rights Commission, the Equality Authority, the Ombudsman for Children and the National Disability Authority budgets have substantially reduced their capacity to protect the most disempowered in society. She reminds us “Human rights are not a policy option, dispensable during times of economic hardship. It is therefore, vital that Ireland immediately undertakes a human rights review of all budgetary and recovery policies and ensures that it complies with ...human rights principles”.

I commend TASC for remaining true to an agenda of equality and social justice and I would encourage you to re-energise yourselves and capture this more positive values-led public mood.

We need to be innovative in thinking of the policies and approaches which will make us a fairer, more equitable society. Much of this will, of course, depend on government policies. But we know from experience that our lives can be affected by the general attitude in the community around us. Can we revive again a conscious sense of pro-active community self-development? Can we rekindle the spirit of meitheal in practical ways that impact on the lives of those worst affected by the current crisis? Is it possible to start with education and jobs for young people? There are resources in every community that could be harnessed to provide mentoring, training, job experience. What about the service providers and carers who have had their budgets cut – is there an interim way to provide support from the community itself? To quote Deepak Chopra – “The possibility of stepping onto a higher plane is there for everyone. It requires no force, effort or sacrifice. It involves little more than changing our ideas about what is normal”.

I would encourage TASC to give leadership in thinking about how individuals and communities in Ireland can change their ideas about what is normal in ways that reach out to and support those who are hurting badly, are desperate, are losing hope. I believe that there is a moment in time, a shift in public mood, that we can build on to change our ideas of what is normal.

Let me now turn to my major topic and say that as well as working towards greater fairness and equity in Irish society, I believe we have an opportunity to give leadership on one of the greatest human rights challenges of the 21st Century – the way in which climate change is beginning to undermine the livelihoods of subsistence farmers, indigenous peoples and slum dwellers in poor developing countries who have no responsibility for causing the problem. This was what prompted the

establishment of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice (www.mrfcj.org). We may be going through tough times in Ireland but some of the world's poorest will suffer even greater deprivation because of the carbon based development we benefit from.

There are many things that we take for granted in our daily lives. We can have light and heat at the flick of a switch, clean water from a tap in our house and food to eat in the fridge; we can buy a newspaper, go online or turn on the TV or radio and have access to information, and uncensored views and opinions. We have the right to vote, universal access to education and the protection of the state in times of need. All of these things contribute to our collective ability to combat climate change and plan for life with some degree of warming.

I would like to explore with you some of the ways in which these things create a society better equipped to deal with climate change – and how the absence of these basic services and rights can increase vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of climate change.

Access to energy

Let's start with waking up in the morning and turning on a light, having a hot shower and boiling the kettle for a cup of tea. All of these actions require access to energy – electricity. An estimated 1.4 billion people around the world do not have access to electricity. Many of them live in urban slums or rural areas unconnected to electricity grids. If we believe in the right to develop (as recognised by the UN in 1986¹) and the right to a better life, we need to improve access to energy. In the past this would have

¹ The right to development was proclaimed by the [United Nations](#) in 1986 in the "Declaration on the Right to Development," which was adopted by the [United Nations General Assembly](#) resolution 41/128.

meant rolling out diesel generators to rural settlements and building new oil and coal fired power stations to supply large centres of population. But in a world of rising oil prices, energy insecurity, anthropogenic climate change and dwindling resources an alternative is needed.

Small to medium scale off-grid renewable energies have the potential to transform people's lives by providing electricity for lighting and cooking – and do so without burning fossil fuels and creating greenhouse gases. These technologies are becoming more and more affordable and their roll out to developing countries is becoming more attractive as the carbon market develops and the Clean Development Mechanism matures.

As a result of increased funding to promote improved access to renewable energy – communities in sub-Saharan Africa are gaining access to micro-finance to access a range of renewable energy products from solar panels to improved stoves. Renewable forms of lighting are providing alternatives to expensive and often dangerous kerosene lamps, allowing children to do their homework and women to make most productive use of their time.² Scaling up these activities will allow developing countries to leapfrog our fossil fuel intensive model of growth and embrace the alternative – low-carbon development.

Access to water

If we go back to our scenario of waking up in a comfortable house in Ireland, switching on the light and having a shower before heading down stairs for a cup of tea – the next assumption is access to water. We have come to appreciate our water supply a little more in Ireland in recent years as floods and cold weather have interrupted supply and dry periods during the summer months have led to drinking water restrictions. Under current

² Examples from REEEP .

scenarios we can expect to have drier summers, especially in the east of the island, and wetter winters, particularly in the west. Water-flow in most Irish streams and rivers could drop dramatically in summer and autumn, but winter flows will increase. While most of the water will be in the west, demand will be concentrated on the eastern seaboard and this disparity will result in significant infrastructural and logistical challenges.

In developing countries where water is already a scarce resource and many women spend several hours of each day walking to collect water for their family's needs - the impacts of climate change will make life even more difficult. The distances travelled to collect water will be greater, water quality inferior and time for other important tasks, such as going to school, will be constrained. Access to water is a critical element of the right to develop. Rainfall and ground and surface water supplies are critical for crop growth, livestock rearing and industrial processing. Without adequate water the development opportunities of a country or community are severely diminished. We know from pilot projects around the world the value of water resource management in maximising the development and ecological potential of water. Watershed management projects in Ethiopia have transformed barren valleys suffering from soil erosion, declining yields and outward migration into vibrant, productive and green communities.

In South Africa and in New York – urban communities are financially rewarding upstream rural communities for their efforts to maintain their environment and manage their land in such a way that water infiltration is maximised and water quality is enhanced. Decision makers in New York City were alarmed at the potential cost of a filtration plant costing in the region of \$4 to 8 billion to meet drinking water standards. So they switched

from an approach focused on ‘end of pipe’ solutions to protecting water quality at source. Water and sewer rates from the city are now used to fund land protection and watershed management programmes upstream of the city avoiding the need for new filtration plants and providing good quality drinking water to millions of urban dwellers.

Payment for ecosystem services / REDD+

This approach to valuing resources and rewarding communities for practices which benefit others is also the concept that informs REDD+, a major global initiative to reward forest communities in developing countries for conserving their forests and avoiding deforestation and degradation. The world’s major forests in the Amazon and Congo basins and in Indonesia play a critical role in absorbing CO₂ from the atmosphere and their destruction is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. REDD+ is an evolving system which allows developed countries to pay forest countries to protect their forests in return for carbon credits. This new approach to recognising and rewarding the actions taken by some forest communities for the common good by mitigating climate change is a core component of a fairer, more equitable global society.

Access to food

So – back again to our morning cup of tea. A slice of toast would be nice – or perhaps a bowl of cereal and milk. Food – an essential part of every human being’s life, a key component of the Irish economy and globally, a very inequitably shared resource. In a major report published this week, ‘Growing a Better Future’, Oxfam has joined Concern and others in warning of mass hunger over rising food prices.

It seems that climate change is already affecting food production in some parts of the world. In Malawi the growing seasons have become so unpredictable that farmers don't know when to sow their seeds – and often when they do their crops are destroyed by intense rainfall, floods or drought. Feeding a world population predicted to reach 9 billion by 2050 will be a real challenge – and climate change adds another dimension to this challenge. How can we increase yields, improve access to food for all and at the same time find ways to reduce the emissions produced by the agriculture sector? We will need to find new ways of doing things – informed by local and indigenous knowledge, married with the best science and research. Ireland, I hope, will have a major part to play in informing this transition.

Information and media

So, assuming we have our tea and toast – we might like to enjoy it while listening to the radio or reading the newspaper. A free and open media in Ireland means that we have access to information, debate and opinion - all of which inform and enrich our lives. We can read about the expected impacts of climate change on our community and the rest of the world, we are exposed to the debate between climate scientists and climate deniers and we can learn about national and international policies to address climate change. Despite access to this information we remain relatively ill-informed about climate change impacts and responses in Ireland³ and it was not a major issue during the last elections.

Compare this with countries in the developing world where climate change is an election issue. In Bangladesh and Guyana climate change is an issue

³ Special Eurobarometer 300. Europeans' attitudes towards climate change. European Commission & European Parliament 2008.

both government and society are well versed in. There is active debate on how best to manage flooding and reduce the impact of cyclones in Bangladesh - and a central part of this discussion is how to pay for these adaptation measures in a country struggling to meet its development objectives. Finance from developed countries with high levels of emissions, as agreed under the UNFCCC, is being used to augment national resources to address climate change.

In Guyana the preparation of a Low Carbon Development Strategy has engaged the public in plans to attract financial support from developed countries through efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+). Funds are now flowing into Guyana from the Government of Norway in return for carbon credits generated through the preservation of forest resources. These funds are starting to be invested in priority adaptation projects and in providing access to renewable energy for rural and urban households.. Media debate and public access to environmental and budgetary information are proving important forces in shaping that country's engagement with REDD+.

And while freedom of expression is a powerful force in shaping responses to climate change in Bangladesh, Guyana and Ireland – not all countries are so forthcoming with this right. An open society with a free press and active public debate can assess and debate the threats posed by climate change and the adequacy and appropriateness of responses to it. However, in less free societies where freedom of expression is suppressed and access to information is limited – the poor become even more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to the absence of information and their inability to influence decision making. Time and time again, participation and consultation have been shown to be powerful forces in shaping

responses to challenges and planning for the future. It is no different for climate change, where those most affected need to be actively engaged in informing planning and decision making at local, national and international levels.

Continuing on my theme of looking at things we take for granted and their role in achieving climate justice – I will move away from the tea and toast (which by now has gone cold) – and address two final issues – education and social protection.

Access to education

In Ireland we know the value of education – but it is in Africa that I have met people who truly VALUE education. Grandmothers responsible for 10 or more grandchildren orphaned by AIDS – who have one wish for their grandchildren – that they go to school, gain an education and create opportunities for themselves. And the quality of education matters too – we need to equip our children and young people with the skills to live in a climate affected world. We need a new breed of urban planner who can design sustainable cities resilient to floods and agronomists with the skills needed to modify well developed farming techniques to a new set of environmental conditions.

This is why in MRFCJ we are placing an emphasis on introducing the concept of climate justice to first and second level students and to finding ways to integrate climate justice into a range of disciplines taught at third level. It also why we are mapping climate justice related research in Ireland – to better understand research which can help to inform equitable responses to climate change and to develop green technologies that enable a transition to low carbon, climate resilient development. In Ireland we place

a strong emphasis on the importance of research in shaping our economic recovery – but there is also an opportunity for this research to shape a new development paradigm – based on equity, justice and sustainability.

Social protection

Climate justice has at its core the need to protect the most vulnerable. Likewise, in a fair and equitable society, there is an emphasis on protecting those most in need and ensuring equal access to opportunities. In Ireland we have a social welfare or social protection system which acts as a safety net in times of stress, illness, unemployment or bereavement. In addition, extreme weather events such as flooding can damage property and livelihoods and necessitate interventions by the state to protect those affected.

Most developing countries don't have formal systems of social protection – relying instead on community and family networks and traditional coping mechanisms such as selling livestock, temporary labouring or migration. Recently, countries such as Ethiopia have started to pilot and roll out social safety nets. Eight million people in Ethiopia are part of the productive safety nets programme which provides food and cash transfers on a monthly basis in return for work on community projects. Many of these projects have climate change benefits, for example improving soil conservation, planting trees and improved management of water resources. As the impacts of climate change multiply the factors that have already made people poor and vulnerable, the role of the safety nets may well increase in importance and become an important part of an effective adaptation strategy.

If we apply the principles of social protection at a global scale – protecting the most vulnerable to build a more equitable society – we are once again in

the field of climate justice. We have many reasons to protect the most vulnerable from the impacts of climate change – because we caused the problem and they are most affected, because we are part of a global society and are highly interdependent, and because we are morally bound to help those less well off than we are. These are all good reasons to act, to make hard decisions and hopefully the right decisions.

In Durban later this year the nations of the world will have another chance to commit themselves to a framework for a more just global society, where real steps are taken to avoid dangerous climate change and to support developing countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change and reap the benefits of low carbon development. There is a real urgency in this, as a report this week by the International Energy Agency (IEA) warned that greenhouse gas emissions increased by a record amount last year when they should have been reducing.

It strikes me that we need to link more effectively policy and action here in Ireland and at the global level. Many of the principles that inform your work for a more equitable Ireland also inform MRFCJ’s work for a more human centred and fair response to the issue of climate change. I encourage you to explore how your research and awareness raising activities can encompass these global issues as well and forge a role for Ireland as a leader in climate justice on the international stage.