Challenges and Opportunities of Climate Justice

Keynote Lecture by Mary Robinson

Alpbach Political Symposium

Sunday 28 August 2011

I am honoured to give a keynote address to the Political Symposium here at Alpbach, where the focus is on international justice and global equity. I had the pleasure of visiting Alpbach this time last year, at the invitation of the United Nations Security Council, to address the theme of Women Peace and Security. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the surroundings of Alpbach, but also became aware of its importance as an annual forum for thoughtful discussion on global concerns.

Climate justice is an interesting concept to juxtapose with global economic justice you have been discussing this afternoon from various perspectives. It will require a modern, multicultural, multi-faceted and urgent response to ensure climate stabilisation in the future, and to address the huge injustices and inequalities being aggravated by its present and future impacts. There are clearly negative impacts, but also opportunities to tackle poverty in an innovative way associated with a climate justice approach.

It is precisely this challenge which I wanted to address by establishing the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice (www.mrfcj.org). I wanted to bring some of the experience I have gained as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and for the past eight years as President of Realizing Rights, to bear on how to create partnerships and alliances to give leadership on the human rights and humanitarian dimensions of climate change. In Realizing Rights we worked with a range of partners to place human rights at the heart of global policy-making, and to amplify the voices of people impoverished, vulnerable and marginalized, especially in Africa. We emphasized economic and social rights, and we focused principally on development challenges, for example how to ensure everyone has the right to health and the right to decent work opportunities. We looked at how to strengthen private sector responsibility for human rights, and women's leadership on human rights, peace and security issues.

By 2007 we realized that there was a topic that, as an initiative focusing on human rights and development, we could not ignore: climate change. What we began to do was communicate broadly that climate change is arguably the greatest human rights threat that will face humankind. We also helped to connect human rights and climate change through the concept of climate justice.

Climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centered approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly. Climate justice amplifies the voices of those people who have done least to cause climate change, but who are most severely affected. A way to conceive of it is to ask the question: Who will carry the costs of climate change? These costs are not only the damage to infrastructure, livelihoods and lives caused by changing weather patterns. They also include the costs of having to limit growth and development if we remain on our fossil-fuel-intensive path, particularly for poor communities and poor countries. Thus climate justice brings into focus not just the enormous threats we face today, but the threats we will face for generations to come. I have a sense of urgency and purpose, that climate justice is the human rights issue I want to prioritise for the rest of my active life!

The Global Humanitarian Forum's Human Impact Report "*The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis",* launched in May 2009 tried to estimate the negative impacts of climate change on people.

The report claims that about 300 million people are severely affected by climate change at a total economic cost of over US$ 100 billion annually. More than 500 million people are living in extreme risk and more than 20 million have already been displaced. It points to the new phenomenon of climate refugees which is already happening in a small way but could reach 200 million by 2050.

Its projections are grim: 20 years from now worldwide deaths could reach 500,000 per year; people affected by climate change annually are expected to rise to more

than 600 million and the total annual economic cost will increase to around US$ 300 billion.

Climate change will raise temperatures, change precipitation patterns and distribution of water, threaten biodiversity, raise the sea level, increase flooding and storm surges, threaten unique systems such as coral reefs, and cause large-scale "singularities" such as the melting of ice shelves. These changes in the natural environment are increasingly causing human impacts: an increase in water insecurity and the time required to collect water; changes in agricultural productivity and food insecurity, with a loss of livelihoods and effects on the wider economy. There are health risks, such as malnutrition, water-borne and vector-borne diseases and deaths from natural disasters. There will be effects on human settlements, on land use patterns, and displacement and involuntary migration. Not only is infrastructure damaged; cultural integrity is damaged, for example in low-lying island states like the Carteret Islands, where whole communities are required to resettle. A friend of mine, Ursula Rakova, is busy making arrangements to evacuate 1,500 islanders from a small Carteret Island in the South Pacific to Bougainville, a larger island that is part of Papua New Guinea. She is a member of Climate Wise Women, speaking in the United States and Europe about the delicate process of negotiating with the communities of Bougainville for land and, just as essential, the acceptance of her people within the new community.

And all of these changes are differentiated by issues of gender, by income level, and by ethnicity and culture. Indigenous peoples, often already pushed to living on the most marginal lands, are among the worst affected.

Today's impacts vary greatly from country to country, with 99% of casualties occurring in developing countries. This fact raises strong global justice issues, since the 50 least developed nations of the world account for less than 1% of the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. The populations most gravely at risk live in some of the poorest areas that are also highly prone to climate change – in particular, the semi-arid dryland belt countries from the Sahara to the Middle East and Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, South and South East Asia, and small island

developing states. Nevertheless, the report indicates that no one is safe from climate change impacts, with around 4 billion people living in zones vulnerable to significant negative impacts of climate change.

Nothing brought this reality home to me more than a visit I made to Somalia and the Horn of Africa last month. I was asked to go there by three development aid agencies, Concern Worldwide, Trócaire and Oxfam Ireland, to draw attention to the scale of the problem. There was a sad context, in that I had gone to Somalia as President of Ireland 19 years earlier in similar circumstances. On arriving there, I was conscious that this time the situation was so much worse. Somalia had not had a proper functioning government over the 19 years; Al Shabab, with links to Al-Qaeda, was causing internal violence; food prices were at an all-time high, and the impacts of climate change were beginning to be felt. The Horn of Africa has just had the 8 hottest years in succession ever recorded, and there has been a prolonged severe drought in parts of Kenya and Ethiopia as well as Somalia. While we were there, two regions of Somalia were declared to be suffering from famine by the United Nations, meaning that thousands of children were dying of starvation. I felt a sense of anger and outrage that famine was being declared anywhere in the world in the 21st century. I also had a sense of foreboding – that it won't be 19 years until the next severe crises in the Horn of Africa.

Given the increasingly negative impact on poor people, are they central to global concerns in UN climate talks? What struck me when I was in Copenhagen for COP 15 in 2009 was the fact that the humanitarian dimension of climate change was not at all central to the formal discussions and negotiations. The emphasis was on mitigation; how to secure an extension of the Kyoto Protocol beyond 2012 for Annex 1 countries, and how to ensure that large emerging economies such as China and India accepted some system of monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) of any commitments they would make to reduce emissions. The focus on mitigation was entirely justifiable as the main challenge, but it became clear that because poor people and countries are not part of the problem of causing emissions, nor were they central to the negotiations at COP 15. Although more than 100,000 people marched through the streets of Copenhagen under the banner of climate justice, the relevant outcome in the Copenhagen Accord was a general, non-binding, agreement to

reduce emissions, without any global target within which individual country pledges needed to remain. In addition, there was reference to a “fast start” fund of $30 billion a year from 2010 – 2012 for developing countries, and a longer term fund of $100 billion a year by 2020. Some commitments were made for the “fast start” fund during the last two years, but the total is below $30 billion, and it is not clear how much is recycled from existing development aid budgets, or given as pledges which may or may not be implemented.

Expectations before Copenhagen were too high, and no fair, ambitious and binding deal emerged. Expectations were quite low going to Cancun, and there was a broad concern as to whether the two-track negotiating process of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action under the UNFCCC (AWG. LCA) and the Ad Hoc Working Group on further commitments for Annex 1 parties under the Kyoto Protocol (AWP-KP) would make sufficient progress to restore confidence in the UN led system.

Under Mexican leadership a high level compromise was struck at the end, bringing the Copenhagen Accord into the UNFCCC process through the Cancun Agreements. Many of the more difficult issues were postponed to COP 17 in Durban this year, and beyond.

These annual COPs not only comprise the main negotiating site for climate change issues. There is also a large number of side events, organized by UN agencies, governments, civil society organisations, businesses, foundations, and “constituency groups” such as indigenous peoples, and many combinations of these groups. These side events will increasingly highlight the human dimension and impacts of climate change, and the need for more balance in funding between mitigation and adaptation, at COP 17 in Durban and future conferences.

In this regard there are two crucial elements contained in the Framework Convention that relate to the concept of climate justice. The first is the twin set of principles of “equity” and “common but differentiated responsibilities”, and “respective capabilities” as follows: “In view of the different contributions to global

environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command." This refers, on the one hand, to our “common responsibility”, building on the concept of a common heritage and common concerns of humankind. It reflects the duty of States of equally sharing the burden of environmental protection for common resources. On the other hand there is “differentiated responsibility”, which addresses the unequal material, and economic situations across countries, their different historical contributions to global emissions, and different financial and, technological capacity to tackle those global problems. Importantly this principle establishes a conceptual framework for an equitable allocation of the costs of global environmental protection. Determining how to divide these responsibilities is of course a key challenge in the negotiations and in public perception of the way forward.

A second important part of this Convention is the “precautionary principle”, which says that, “Where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation”. This cements the understanding that we cannot afford to wait until all scientists agree with certainty the specific causes and rates of anthropogenic climate change. The essence of this principle has of course been under constant attack by the so-called “climate deniers” who have fostered confusion and inaction.

However there is another value which is not yet reflected in the UN Framework Convention, namely, the need for a strong gender perspective on each of the issues being discussed in the various tracks.

Women make up the majority of the world's poorest people, and given existing gender inequalities and development gaps, climate change ultimately places a greater burden on them. Men and women are affected by climate change in different ways, because the roles expected of them and the demands made of them by

families and communities are very different. This is very relevant for Africa, for example, where women are the primary food producers and providers of water and cooking fuel for their families, while having greater responsibility for family and community welfare.

A climate justice approach amplifies the voices of those people who have done least to cause climate change, but who are affected most severely by it. They include the citizens of island states and vulnerable countries fighting for their very survival; indigenous communities whose lands and resources are under threat; women farmers feeding their families and growing much of the world's food. And it includes the poorest and most marginalized people world-wide who already suffer most from poverty, hunger, ill-health and injustice.

Climate justice thus incorporates a strong gender perspective. Gender inequities alone can motivate more women to lead in taking action, but women's leadership must address the entire range of climate issues as well as bringing a gender perspective to each of them. Women in many countries are adversely affected by the impacts of climate change, but they are also powerful agents of change taking action at global, national and community levels. If, as a global community, we hope to respond to the immense challenge of climate change, women leaders must play a greater role in innovating, deciding and implementing the solutions that are so urgently required. The leadership, participation, knowledge and experience of women, especially from the global South and communities most affected by climate change, is vital to successful mitigation, as well as adaptation.

MRFCJ is currently supporting an alliance of women leaders on climate change, which had an initial meeting in Cancun and has been developing over recent months in preparation for COP 17 in Durban. It is led by women ministers from the three countries who have held or will hold the chair of the COP: Denmark, Mexico and South Africa, and we hope it will have an impact on policy developments such as the Green Climate Fund and future thinking on mitigation, adaptation, financing and transfer of technologies.

So far I have focussed on the negative impacts of climate change, but there are also opportunities which are part of a climate justice approach. We must take advantage of innovations in science and technology – but in an inclusive way that is sure to benefit all people. The digital divide is real: so is the access to energy divide. In European countries, most homes have electricity, of course, and many have computers. An increasing number have solar panels. But in Africa, while 40% of households are estimated to have a mobile telephone, still only 1% has a computer. Across the world, fully 1.4 billion people lack access to energy in their homes. And about 2.7 billion women in the world are still cooking with open fires. These figures are stark and depressing, but with them I want to convey a sense of opportunity. What has dawned on many people in the international development and human rights communities over the last two years is that solving the world's climate change problem can also solve other challenges. If we find a path to low-carbon growth and access to energy for all, using non-fossil fuel sources, we will be turning the corner on the pace of global warming.

We will not make significant progress on a challenge of the scale of climate change unless we have three sectors of society tackling it together: international and regional organisations and governments, civil society, including universities, and the private sector. When one is lagging, the others must pull ahead – but over time all three must work in concert. Second, we cannot tackle the gravest threats we face – from systematic human rights abuses to climate change – unless political leaders have the political will to do so. This requires enlightened and visionary political leaders who know that their constituencies care about an issue. So when it comes to climate change, citizens of northern countries have to care.

Can European countries give real leadership and begin to see climate change mitigation and adaptation as their responsibility? Will we hold our own leaders accountable for addressing climate change? I have no doubt that the answer is yes – but only if we look at climate change as an opportunity as well as a threat.

I see the opportunities as lying primarily in two areas. The first is that helping developing countries to build resilience to the effects of climate change and to adapt

successfully will make European countries' development assistance euros, and other currencies, go much farther. Given these difficult economic times, when aid budgets are at the risk of being carved away, we have to ensure that every euro and other European currency spent will be used wisely.

The second set of opportunities lies in greening our own economies in Europe. Businesspeople have seen the enormous financial opportunities in new technologies and also in the more prosaic but equally important area of green retrofits. The global trade union movement has identified the opportunities for workers to share in the benefits by working together with the public sector and employers. The report, "Green Jobs: Towards Decent Work in a Sustainable, Low-Carbon Economy[1]" emphasises that green jobs already exist and that there are many opportunities for expansion across the EU, the US and developing countries. Many can identify the triple win here: to give a boost to the European economy, to develop technologies and processes that improve the lives of people in developing countries, and to slow down the warming of our planet.

Let me end with the sobering words of a noted expert on climate change Bert Metz – words that I, as a grandmother, very much identify with[2]:

"My grandchildren will likely experience the climate of the 2080s and 2090s. They will personally face the turmoil in the world when climate change gets out of control. I want to make my small contribution to save them and their generation from that".

[1] Cited in ITUC "Statement Trade Unions and Climate Change: Equity, justice and solidarity in the fight against climate change." December 2009, p11

[2] E Bert Metz Controlling Climate change P.XV.