



**Mary Robinson  
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Climate Justice

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## **Re-shaping the Debate on Climate Change**

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Director-General, Ladies and Gentleman

I am very pleased to have been invited to give one of the Environmental Protection Agency's climate change lectures – the first of the 2010 – 2011 series. I know that the Agency has hosted 10 very successful events to date attracting speakers of the highest calibre who have illustrated the many different aspects and challenges of climate change. All the lecturers to date have followed the EPA description of the remit – to focus *“on providing updates from the science of climate change as well as the policy and political response to this global challenge”*.

My approach is somewhat different – as the title suggests I feel it is important to re-shape the debate somewhat. That is not in any way denying the science rather it is simply putting people, both individuals and communities, at the centre. So let me begin to argue my case!

In hard times it can be difficult to attend to the long term. When recession and debt pose urgent constraints, ten-year targets and fifty-year plans may appear a luxury. Climate change can appear far away, in both time and space. And yet, of course, it is not far away, it is not merely a 'long-term' problem. Climate change is what we are doing right here and right now.

That this proximity is often forgotten is testament to the many ways in which the headline debates about climate change can lead us astray. For example, we tend to think of climate change as something invisible, something that is taking place behind the scenes so to speak. But it is actually very visible. It is visible in the disappearing glaciers and the receding snows of Kilimanjaro. It is visible in the carbon monoxide plumes of rush hour traffic and the city lights seen from planes flying



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overhead. It is visible in the 10cm of sea level rise around the Irish coast since 1900, and in the £1 billion a year the British government now spends on flood damage.

Or again, climate change can appear to require a leap of faith, as something almost mystical, a domain of 'believers'. But again, this is not so. Our understanding of climate change is based on hard science that is not only thoroughly vetted, but that is easier to understand than much of the financial wizardry of the past decade of derivatives and rebundled debt.

So while we often speak of climate change as requiring vision, it does not really need much more vision than we need to act—to do the right thing—in any other area of life. The evidence is here in front of us. The means to deal with it are too. The vision that is needed is merely a belief that we can act, individually, and ultimately collectively, to address it.

The energy we use, the forms of transport we choose, the decisions we take for the economy—to open new terminals for example—the degree to which we diagnose the consequences of our actions—all of these things are right now and right here.

In recent months and years, the debate on climate change has become somewhat tense and obscure. Perhaps it is time to change it. I am going to suggest this evening that change means talking clearly about two things: what we can do right now about climate change, and who will suffer if we fail. These are the things I will talk about this evening.

Let me begin with the second of these points: who will suffer if we fail to manage climate change? The question immediately opens up other questions.

For one, are there not already people suffering from climate change? The answer appears to be yes. So far, it is mostly restricted to the world's extremities: among the Arctic peoples, for example, fishing and herding patterns are changing; livestock that used to be seasonally dependable are less so. In Saharan Africa, the dry periods have been becoming longer and harsher, on average, for some time. In Tuvalu, an island made of coral, residents are already beginning to feel the water bubbling up under their feet.



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And while it is predicted that each of these phenomena will worsen, it won't be long before we can add to them an increase in the intensity (if not the number) of hurricanes and a shift in their location towards more populated areas, flooding and eroding coastal areas, droughts.

Another question that arises when we ask who will suffer if we fail to manage climate change is what would it mean to 'manage' climate change at all? There are at least two different ways we might manage it. One would be to prevent it altogether, or reduce the chances of it becoming severe or irreversible. A second way of managing it is to learn how to adapt to those changes that will take place.

As to the first, the idea that we can stop climate change happening at all is looking increasingly out of reach. As things stand, global concentrations of greenhouse gases cannot increase by very much more, if we are to stop average temperatures from rising 2 degrees, the target set at Copenhagen (and one that will involve very much hardship for people in certain parts of the world).

However, none of the main emitting countries currently have policies in place that would achieve this goal. One important reason for this is that the immensity of the task of emission reductions is frightening for rich world governments. It is simply hard to see how emissions can be reduced by 90%, even over 40 years. As a result there has been a lot of talk of achieving global cuts by acting in low-emission countries. Acting to put clean technology in poor countries is immensely important. But it is not a substitute for cutting at home. By definition, there is less room to cut there than here.

In truth we have reached the limits of the world's development space and from now on the challenge will be to ensure it is equitably distributed. Factor in development needs and population growth and the scale of the task comes quickly apparent.

Equally obviously, we cannot sit back and resign ourselves to the possibility that we will overshoot our targets and so have to adapt to a changing climate—the second kind of management. For our capacity to adapt will depend on how well we have succeeded in stalling or impeding climate change in the first place. Our adaptive ability depends not only on the *degree* of climate change that eventually happens—and of course it becomes more difficult with every marginal increase in global average temperatures. It also depends on the *predictability* of the effects—for we can only prepare for outcomes that we can reasonably expect.



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Unfortunately, the more we allow climate change to take hold, the more unpredictable will be the effects. This is true for a variety of reasons, including the existence of feedback loops and the complexity of the world's climate, which is beyond even our best models. There are degrees of mismanagement, and each further step we take into a world of climate unpredictability will bring in its wake an ever expanding group of likely victims. But the actual vulnerability of individuals in any given case will be ever less predictable.

That takes me back to the question I haven't really addressed yet: who will suffer? There are ways in which we will all suffer, of course, from the loss of biodiversity, of plant and animal life that climate change will reap. These are losses to the planet and to humankind as such. But there are also very particular people and groups who will bear tremendous personal costs. For the most part, the numbers of these people remain large and somewhat vague, couched in the language of probability.

Flooding in the low-lying delta areas of Bangladesh, for example, are predicted to affect 20 million people. This figure is too large to comprehend: it fails the imagination. In time these shadowy figures will begin to take on flesh and blood attributes, as we begin with more confidence to attribute floods and other extreme weather events to climate change. The recent floods in Pakistan, for example, are a case in point: they took place at a time when freshwater flows have increased by 18% since 1994, challenging the existing flood-control infrastructure in many countries. Were the flood victims also climate victims? Questions of this kind will no doubt always be somewhat contestable, but as climate-events proliferate their man-made cause will become ever more difficult to deny.

But there are plenty of concrete examples of populations vulnerable to climate harms right now. Inuit groups in Alaska and Northern Canada testified, in a legal brief taken to a regional human rights tribunal, to the degree to which their lifestyles had already been impacted by changing coastlines and the altered migratory patterns of fish and animals. These Inuit are now asking the rest of us—the international community—do they not have a 'right to be cold'? Sami reindeer herders in Norway have voiced similar concerns about the depletion of their livelihoods. The populations of sinking islands such as Kiribati and Tuvalu are increasingly treating their plight as urgent. In some cases, small island governments are supporting proactive emigration to, and even seeking territory in, less vulnerable neighbouring countries.



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But beyond these considerations of individual harms, the question ‘who will suffer?’ is also a much larger question, one that I call ‘climate justice’. What is climate justice? Perhaps the most straightforward way to conceive it is to ask the question: who will carry the costs of climate change? The costs include not only the actual damage to lives and livelihoods caused by changing weather patterns. They also include the costs of adapting and the costs of having to either stall development or to develop in new and untried ways. Viewed in this way, the degree to which climate change carries the potential for grossly cruel and unfair outcomes begins to come into focus.

I mentioned earlier that we have practically used up the world’s development space. We have of course benefitted immensely while doing so. But the ‘we’ who have benefitted remains a comparatively small minority. One billion people today live in hunger. One billion live in slums. Many more live in poverty, however it is measured. We have witnessed a long period of extraordinary growth and wealth-creation, but large swathes of the earth’s population have been omitted from the process. Even within richer countries, of course, these benefits are spread very unevenly. But the principal wealth differential remains broadly between countries, or groups of countries: North-South or developed-developing.

Before now, there were two common responses to this observation. The most common has been to say that the poorer world will catch up in time. The key challenge is to find the sorts of policies that promote growth and development and to implement those policies in poorer countries. There has been much talk of creating ‘enabling environments’ for growth and investment, about the benefits of free trade and intellectual property protections, and about the need to build the ‘rule of law’ in fragile states. The richer world has been active in creating these frameworks in poorer countries through development assistance.

A second, less commonly articulated, view said it was up to poor countries to adopt the appropriate means of generating growth themselves. This response derived either from a solid belief in self-determination—that the rich world had no business telling poorer countries what to do. Or it came from the rather less charitable assumption that developing countries had no-one to blame but themselves for their predicament, and were not owed a handout from the rest of the world, from wealth to which they had contributed little.



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It is gradually becoming clear, however, that climate change is making both of these positions difficult to sustain. As to the first, continuing global growth at 2 percent, to which we have become accustomed in recent years, is simply not compatible with the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gases. The planet will not be able to bear the consequences of all populations attaining to the kinds of standards that typify the wealthiest lifestyles. Even with a revolution in green technologies—a revolution that, if vital, has so far been slow in coming—it is clear that stark choices lie ahead about what kinds of lifestyle will be universalisable, on one hand, and what basic subsistence level must be available to everyone, on the other.

As to the second argument, it turns out that poorer countries *have* been contributing all along, and not just in terms of the standard natural resources we are all familiar with. First, they have contributed in that the space for carbon-driven development that was always assumed to be waiting for them no longer exists. That space has already been confiscated and used towards growth in other parts of the world. And second, they now appear to be further paying in terms of the ravages of climate change.

In short, as things stand, the world's poorest seem to be well placed to carry much, if not most, of the cost of climate change: the costs in terms of the harms of climate change itself, but also the opportunity costs in terms of development options foregone. The distribution of costs at present, in short, is extraordinarily, starkly, unjust.

What is crystal clear is that, from now on, the wellbeing of those in richer and poorer countries is intimately related. The global development space is, it turns out, very scarce. It must be treated with immense respect and closely regulated—and the same rules must, sooner or later, apply to everyone. Development is a global concern, and so, by corollary, is the welfare of those living in other countries.

We live, in short, in a world of increasing intimacy. It is not enough for me to realise that my carbon-saturated life here today has in part caused the climate refugee fleeing her flooded home in Bangladesh tomorrow. I must also recognise that if she is to be denied access to carbon-fuelled economic growth, I must also, surely, be obliged to provide her some substitute form of wherewithal.



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Our good life here—and of course, the current financial mess should not blind us to the fact that this is a good life; it is a very good life—has, it turns out, been built, at least in part, on her precariousness there.

Of course we already know this. To approach climate change as climate justice, however, means we cannot ignore it. We must respond. We must do the right thing.

These thoughts have already led me some way into my second question: what can we do right now. In further response to this question, it is worth noticing that one country has already pledged to be carbon-neutral by 2020. That is the Maldives. The Maldives, of course, is a tiny polluter, and its efforts will have no noticeable impact on climate change. But there lies the rub. The Maldives is likely to sink before the century is out, and cannot, by itself, do anything about it. So it is showing the way to the rest of us.

The Maldives story shows us two things. On one hand, this problem will only be fixed through concerted global action. As long as the energy used in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole (700 million persons) continues to be matched by that of greater New York City (19 million), we cannot expect to fix it.

On the other hand, however, countries don't have to wait for international negotiations to be resolved in order to take steps to treat climate change. They can act on their own. They can show the way. Even if they cannot lead the world, they can show what leadership is. They can do the right thing. They can light a candle rather than cursing the darkness. They can start to think through what a responsible economic policy would look like in a climate justice world. They can begin to enact R&D policies that focus on green technologies. They can begin to explore means of transferring technologies to countries badly needing them.

So it turns out that a debate about climate change is actually a conversation about many other things. About growth, about energy, about technology, about economic policy, about international relations, about ethical leadership, about what a *global* policy might look like, and, indeed, about the impossibility, henceforth, of not having one.



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But this aspect of climate change—the way it changes how we talk and think about everything else—is not always obvious in the way we talk about climate change itself. Too often we still talk about the weather. Or we get nervous about the implications for a given government of taking unpopular steps, with elections always looming up ahead. Or we debate the science and the scandals.

Perhaps it is time we started instead, to talk about justice. When we do, many of the answers will begin to appear much more obvious.

It is my firm belief that we must focus on justice that led me to establish The Mary Robison Foundation – Climate Justice under the Innovation Alliance of Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin. We will not be building a major office rather we will be a “lean, mean machine” focussing on solidarity, partnership and shared engagement with all interested in climate justice. We will provide a space for facilitating action on climate justice and we plan to make our website a “one-stop-shop” for up to date and accurate information on the topic and best practices for solutions to inequities faced by the most vulnerable. And we will always be focused on sustainable and people-centred development.

I look forward to the challenges ahead and to exploring potential linkages with the EPA, other agencies and third-level institutions throughout the island of Ireland and abroad.

In conclusion, let me return to the concern I expressed at the beginning of my talk this evening – the fact that in hard times it can be difficult to attend to the long term. I hope my talk this evening has helped convince you we don’t have the luxury of not attending to the long term - and as I so often do I will rely on the words of one of our great writers to help argue my case, to show us the way.

In his great poem “Under Ben Bulbin” Yeats said, and I quote,

*Cast your mind on other days  
That we in coming days may be  
Still the indomitable Irishry.*

Now more than ever we need to draw on that spirit of “indomitable Irishry” to encourage us to work to secure climate justice for all – working from Ireland to impact on the world.

Thank you.