

Food Security and Climate Justice

Remarks by Mary Robinson, President of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice

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I would like to thank the All Party Parliamentary Group on Agriculture and Food for Development for convening this panel and inviting me to speak to you today and for inviting such a broad cross section of officials and civil society representatives. I am pleased to join with David Nabarro and Melinda Kimble of the UN Foundation. The Durban Climate Conference (COP17) is just around the corner, and while expectations for the conference are mixed – I believe the international community can and must deliver actions to protect the most vulnerable. This will be an African based COP and the challenge ahead is to make it deliver for the slum dwellers, small holder farmers and herders, many of them women, that make up so much of the continent.

As we meet today, over 13 million people in the Horn of Africa are hungry and in desperate need of assistance. The crisis that has afflicted the region since the middle of this year has demonstrated just how fragile the food situation remains in many countries. It also brings into focus the vulnerability of individual households; where living on one meal a day, selling your last animal and even having to leave your home are clearly not viable adaptation strategies. For families enduring under nutrition and food insecurity as part of their daily life, climate change adds an unbearable additional burden. Our job, as

citizens of the developed world, made rich by fossil fuel powered growth, is to minimise the impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable – by supporting developing countries and communities to adapt their livelihoods, protect their resources and embrace low carbon development.

This is the essence of climate justice – which is the focus of my Foundation, the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice. Climate Justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly. The foundation is working to address the human face of climate change – and in the context of the work of this committee, those faces are of farmers, herders and fisher folk struggling to make a living and feed their families, while coping with the impacts of climate change.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) strives to address the causes of climate change through commitments by Parties to cut greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the changing climate. Central to a greener, more sustainable and equitable future in Africa is agriculture - and the smallholder farmers that are responsible for much of the continents' food production. But, what do they know of climate change and how is it affecting their lives? And what would they want the international community to agree in Durban?

I would like to spend some time looking at these questions. On the first question – the answer is clear – farmers and herders throughout Africa are already feeling the impacts of a changing climate. When I was in Somalia and Northern Kenya earlier this year farmers told me the seasons are changing – making it impossible to know when to plant precious seeds. Rain fall is too little or too much and pastoralists are finding it more and more difficult to find grazing and water for their livestock. Ultimately yields are in decline and food insecurity is the result. A number of ideas were suggested by my guide, Leina Mpolle, a member of Concern and a Masai who is a qualified veterinary surgeon. He called for a positive policy for pastoralists: smaller, more productive herds – with a preference for camels over goats; provision of income for families left behind when herders have to travel further because of drought, such as chickens and honey production; fodder drops at known locations during extreme drought and so on.

The UN estimates that 50% of the world's hungry people are smallholder farmers. Agriculture continues to play an important role in most developing countries with up to 75% of people relying on agriculture for their livelihoods. Women play a significant and unique role in food and nutrition security, responsible for growing, buying, selling and cooking food. Between 60 and 80 % of the food produced in most developing countries is produced by women. I believe that it is women who hold the key to tackling hunger and malnutrition. Many of the interventions designed to help communities to become more food secure such as farm technology, extension services and nutrition programmes are failing to take into account women's multiple roles and the specific constraints they face.

Many farmers struggle to access the support that they need. Access to appropriate technology and credit pose significant challenges. Smallholders typically have limited savings, limited opportunity for employment in less vulnerable occupations and limited social and political assets. If crops fail, subsistence farmers have few or no alternative means to provide food for their families. Natural disasters such as floods, or a sudden illness, can overwhelm a poor household, destroying its ability to cope. Climate variability and extremes are very much a part of life in sub-Saharan Africa, as elsewhere. But where people are poor and vulnerable, these factors add greatly to their hardship.

The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that up to 25% of world food production could be lost by 2050 as a result of climate change, water scarcity and land degradation. Meanwhile, the Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that by 2085, climate change could result in the loss of 11% of arable land in developing countries. Feeding a growing world population with the added challenges posed by climate change is a daunting task.

The World Food Programme estimates that for a pathway of continuing high population growth and regional disparities, the numbers at risk of hunger because of climate change are projected at 10 – 20% above the number expected without climate change¹. Which means 1 million more children will be malnourished by 2030 due to the impacts of climate change.

¹ Climate Change and Hunger, Responding to the Challenge; WFP 2009.

As dietary preferences change, contributing to increased demand for meat and dairy products, the quantities of land, water and energy required to feed the world's population will soar. The challenge is to find ways to produce the food needed in a sustainable way, within the limits of what our ecosystems can support for current and future generations and to safeguard this production from the impacts of climate change. Rising global temperatures and changing rainfall patterns will affect crop growth, livestock and the availability of water and fisheries. With extreme weather events predicated to become both more severe and more frequent, volatility in production and prices will continue to place a burden on those least able to pay.

Looking to the future, the UK Government's Foresight report "The Future of Food and Farming" produced earlier this year explores the increasing pressures on the global food system between now and 2050. The report highlights the vulnerability of the global food system to climate change and other global threats. Two significant failings of the current food system are highlighted – one, that hunger remains widespread, and two, that many systems of food production are unsustainable. This leads the report to conclude, and I believe correctly so, that addressing climate change and achieving sustainability in the global food system need to be recognised as dual imperatives.

A strong message we can take from the Foresight report is that food policy must be informed by the science of climate change, and climate change policy must take greater note of the need to address agriculture and food production. Two meetings held in Africa this September explored the links between climate change and agriculture and indicated some useful follow up action for the international community.

African Agriculture Ministers meeting in Johannesburg to discuss climate smart agriculture called for “an Agriculture Programme of Work that covers adaptation and mitigation” under the UNFCCC. This was reiterated at a meeting of African Ministers for the Environment in Bamako which recommended “that a comprehensive work programme on agriculture in non-Annex 1 Parties be established under the Cancun Adaptation Framework and further recommend that agriculture be addressed as a matter of priority in relation to the mitigation commitments of Annex 1 Parties”. These are clear messages for Durban and could help to provide a platform to address the linked challenges of food security and climate change.

In my travels in Africa I have been left in no doubt that the people most affected are all too aware of the impact of climate change. My second question was; what would the smallholder farmers and herders of Africa want the international community to agree in Durban?

Clearly one thing they would want is to make room in the agenda for discussions on agriculture as pointed out by African Ministers in Bamako and Johannesburg. The EU is already supportive of this approach and I hope it will continue to be in Durban. A work programme on agriculture is an achievable outcome from Durban and one I know Ireland will be working to support at COP17.

Another key focus from an agriculture and food security perspective is to highlight and address the gender dimensions of climate change in the outcomes from the Conference. Any effort to increase productivity, adapt to climate change, manage climate risk or mitigate agricultural emissions must address the differences in how women and men manage their assets and activities. In particular, we need to redress historical tendencies to underplay the role of women.

My Foundation is working to harness women's leadership at the international level through a Troika+ of women leaders on gender and climate change. This alliance led by the women Presidents of COPs 15, 16 and 17 will highlight the gender dimensions of climate change and demonstrate the value of women's leadership throughout COP17. I encourage you all to echo these messages in your work – to value the role played by women in food production and to empower them to play a key role in the climate smart agriculture of the future.

But most critically – what will Durban do to provide assurances to vulnerable small holders, men and women, that dangerous climate change will be avoided and that steps will be taken to help them to adapt to climate change and embrace a new, low carbon future? Central to this is the future of the Kyoto Protocol, set to expire at the end of December next year unless a second commitment period is agreed; and the need for a new legally binding agreement to lock in ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reductions and provide support for developing countries.

In conversations with my African friends in recent weeks, including with the South African parliamentary committee I met this morning, they have told me they don't want the Kyoto Protocol to be 'buried in African soil'. To avoid this, we urgently need to make progress on a package in Durban which brings together the two negotiating tracks addressing the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention, to pave the way for a convergence phase during which the Kyoto Protocol continues to operate while steps are taken to work towards a new legally-binding instrument. This is ambitious but achievable and could set us on a path to agree a new legally binding instrument by 2015. I remain absolutely convinced – as I know Chris Huhne is - that a legally binding deal is the only viable way forward. Bottom up and voluntary approaches are too vulnerable to economic and political pressures and provide no assurances that we will deliver the actions needed to safeguard the planet and critically, the people who live on it. As Mr Huhne says 'a voluntary agreement is a false promise'.

I would like to commend the UK, and you as Parliamentarians and wider civil society, for the actions the UK is taking to lead by example, even in the present difficult funding environment. The Climate Change Act, the establishment of an independent advisory committee on climate change and the fact that the UK now has the toughest legally binding carbon targets through to 2027 of any country in the world are all evidence of your commitment to action on climate change.

I am aware that the difficult climate of cutbacks may affect the capacity to implement fully the intentions. However, Chris Huhne has emphasised the importance of acting at home first as demonstrated by the Fourth Carbon Budget. He is also working to build a

low carbon coalition, pushing for more ambitious emissions reductions in Europe, the G20 and the Major Economies Forum. I encourage you to continue to work through the UNFCCC for an ambitious legally binding agreement. We have a chance to make progress towards this in Durban – and failure to do so will undoubtedly damage the multilateral process and leave farmers in Africa vulnerable and without the support they need.

The UK has been a leader in the efforts to tackle the problems posed by climate change and food insecurity. The challenge ahead is to address these linked challenges in a cohesive and meaningful way. In Ireland this is starting to be addressed through Ireland's development assistance programme which has a strong focus on addressing the causes of hunger and tackling under-nutrition. At the UN General Assembly in New York this September, the Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland (Tánaiste) Eamon Gilmore framed these challenges in the context of a climate affected world stating that 'there is a compelling case for climate justice – bringing developmental fairness to bear on the climate change agenda'. I believe the UK can echo this sentiment, by showing continued leadership on climate change and food security and by linking the two in policy and practice. It is in all our interests.