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Food Security: A Climate Justice Approach

Remarks by Mary Robinson,

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Thank you for inviting me to speak here today – over lunch I had the opportunity to hear about the discussions you had in the working sessions this morning and I look forward to learning more from you all this afternoon.

COP17 is a vital test of the international community’s willingness to tackle the issues that result from the impact of climate change, including the most fundamental issue of food security. We are having these discussions on the continent of Africa – where hunger and under nutrition are ever present threats. The Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that 925 million people in the world go hungry every day. And every year 3.5 million children die from under nutrition, while 11% of the total disease burden is attributable to maternal and child under nutrition.

As we meet today, over 13 million people in the Horn of Africa continue to be in desperate need of assistance. The region has had eight of the hottest years ever in succession, resulting in devastating drought. Since the food price crisis of 2008, food security has again been high on the agenda of donors, NGOs and multilateral aid agencies as they recognised the central

role that agriculture plays in helping people to escape from dire poverty and famine. The more recent scenes from the Horn of Africa brought home the terrible vulnerability of the people living there to weather and climate shocks. It reinforced the imperative of sustaining efforts and attention on food and nutrition security, and the urgency of tackling the problem.

I visited the Horn of Africa last July, 19 years after the visit I made as President of Ireland in 1992. After that first visit I said that what I saw offended my sense of justice, the sense that all of us, no matter where we live, have the right to the basic necessities of life as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – the right to food, to clean water. Returning to Somalia after 19 years renewed my sense of shame and anger because the plight of the people in the region is as precarious and life-threatening as ever.

One of my guides during this year's visit, Leina Mpoke of Concern Worldwide, put the plight of pastoralists in Kenya very clearly. He himself is a Masai and a qualified vet. He is a champion of pastoralists, who comprise 20% of the population of Kenya living in 80% of the country which is arid land. He speaks passionately about the value of pastoralists to the Kenyan economy: they provide local food security and a valuable meat market to the cities. 'What do you fear?' I asked him. 'This is the worst drought I have known,' he said, 'and this is only July. The rains won't come until at least October.'

And with cruel irony the rains did come in October - according to the Kenyan Met office, two regions, Wajir and Narok received more than 8 times their average October rainfall resulting in severe flooding. Leina and his community are now coping with floods, aggravating the

humanitarian situation caused by the drought. This is causing untold additional misery to herders, farmers and those living in the sprawling refugee camps.

But this experience of drought and floods isn't limited to the Horn of Africa. I met some of the 200+ participants in the Caravan of Hope on Sunday when I arrived in Durban and again on Wednesday evening. Starting out in Burundi they travelled from 10 African countries to bring their experiences of climate change to COP 17. They are farmers, fisher folk, herders, artists, musicians and students and they desperately want their voices to be heard.

Paul Okongo, a fisherman and farmer from Lake Victoria told me that farmers in Kenya are fully aware of climate change and that they act as barometers or 'first detectors' of the changes to seasons and weather patterns. Mailes Zulu Muile from Zambia, a woman, a farmer and a formidable advocate for the rights of poor rural women in her community, pointed out that she doesn't have a car, she doesn't have a bicycle even, so why is she paying the price for climate change? And my friend Constance Okollet from eastern Uganda has just lost 2 hectares of ground nuts due to heavy rains last month – when traditionally November is in the dry season. How, she wonders, will they have enough to eat next year?

Over the past 50 years, the world has benefitted from significant economic growth, technological advancement and greater global integration. Hundreds of millions of people have increased their living standards and escaped from poverty. This has been a phenomenal achievement. Yet, while the proportion of people suffering from hunger has fallen over the last 50 years, the absolute number has risen, especially in Sub Saharan Africa, and

particularly since the turn of the century. 2008 saw this number exceed 1 billion for the first time in history.

The 2011 Global Hunger Index, which was recently published, shows 26 countries as having levels of hunger that are alarming or extremely alarming. All of those with extremely alarming levels—Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Eritrea—are in Sub-Saharan Africa.

To the burden faced by families desperately trying to combat under-nutrition and food insecurity has been added the burden of climate change. Climate change is one of the key drivers of change affecting the food system and contributing to rising prices. Increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events, as highlighted in the most recent IPCC report, heightens the risk of food insecurity and under-nutrition.

I believe that 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.

I come to climate change and the challenge of food security from a human rights perspective.

The Right to Food is one of the most basic rights of humankind. Not only is it one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but it has been reflected in a series of UN Conventions ranging from the Rights of the Child to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. It is worth recalling the words of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:

“The right to adequate food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means to its procurement..... States have a core obligation to take the necessary action to mitigate and alleviate hunger even in times of natural and other disasters.”

As a signal of the importance it attaches to food security, the UN’s Human Rights Commission appointed a Special Rapporteur in 2000 to monitor progress on implementation of the Right to Food. The current UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, recently welcomed the decision of the G20 to place food security at the top of its agenda but he added a warning note:

“Time is running out for world leaders, who must go beyond rhetoric and deliver real change. The hungry cannot wait. Unless decisive action is taken now, vulnerable populations will grow hungrier, food markets will be increasingly unstable, and the world will remain completely unprepared for the challenge of feeding 9 billion people by 2050.”

This reference to the world of 2050 with 9 billion people living in a climate affected world worries me and scares me – my grandchildren will be in

their forties and the world will be a very different place. It is estimated that by then up to 25% of world food production could be lost as a result of climate change, water scarcity and land degradation resulting in an increase of 10-20% in the number of people going hungry.

A positive development is the renewed focus on the key role that agriculture plays in addressing food security and the search for innovative approaches to agriculture, including Climate Smart Agriculture, the subject of our deliberations here today.

When Sir John Beddington spoke to you all this morning he presented the recent report of the Commission on Sustainable Agriculture and Climate Change, *Achieving food security in the face of climate change*. Some of the recommendations have particular resonance for me;

The first is the need to target populations and sectors that are most vulnerable to climate change and food insecurity through the creation of safety nets and contingency funds that respond to climate shocks.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge the challenges involved in reducing agricultural GHG emissions while increasing food production to meet the needs of 9 billion people by 2050. These challenges are not insurmountable. There is great potential for synergies between actions that promote both mitigation and food security and that also have positive benefits in terms of increased resilience and poverty reduction.

I am also pleased to see the focus on small holder farmers. We know that up to 75% of people living in developing countries rely on agriculture for

their livelihoods – and that over 90% of Africa’s agricultural production comes from small-scale production. Many of these farmers are women, who play a critical role in food and nutrition security and are responsible for growing, buying, selling and cooking the food. Between 60 and 80 percent of the food produced in most developing countries is produced by women. In sub-Saharan Africa the figure is between 80 and 90 percent, yet women own less than 2% of the land. 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.

We can’t afford to make this mistake with climate smart agriculture – it cannot be gender blind. We must make sure that it embodies and enables gender equity and both protects vulnerable women and men and provides equal opportunity to benefit from new technologies and farming techniques.

Innovations and progress on practical tools for Climate Smart Agriculture are emerging – you have been learning about them all morning - but knowledge gaps remain and more research is needed.

This is the logic behind the call for a work programme on agriculture under the UNFCCC; to address adaptation and mitigation and the many synergies between the two. While the current text is blocked due to linked agenda items on bunker fuels and issues around trade, this COP must deliver action on the links between climate change and food and nutrition security. I hope that a high level decision can be agreed which acknowledges the importance of agriculture to Africa and the rest of the world and creates space in the Convention for further work to be done.

This is one of three priority areas I would like to see progress on in Durban.

The others are legal form and women's leadership.

1. On the issue of legal form - A legally binding deal on climate change is the only meaningful way forward. Central to this is agreement on 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 pathway to a new legally binding agreement to lock in ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reductions and provide support for developing countries.

There is an urgent need to make progress on a package 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 chart the way towards agreement on a new legally binding instrument by 2015.

2. On the issue of women's leadership, I am pleased that COP17 got off to a great start with both the outgoing and incoming COP presidents highlighting the gender dimensions of climate change and the importance of women's leadership in the process at national and community level.

I hope this will translate into greater recognition of the gender dimension of climate change in the texts resulting from COP17 leading to greater

gender equality in the ways in which we respond to the challenge of climate change.

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 meet again here at COP17 to provide a platform for women's leadership and commit to further actions to address the gender dimensions of climate change.

This is important in the context of your work – remember that women play a central role in feeding the world – it is one of our maternal responsibilities. I will continue to advocate a focus on women farmers to enable them to produce more and reap the benefits of climate smart agriculture.

As we discuss the climate sensitive sector of agriculture and the impact of climate change on food security, it is important that we place the discussion in the wider context of sustainable development. Agreement reached on Sustainable Development some 20 years ago at the Earth Summit represented a major change. For the first time at international level, it was agreed that economic development must incorporate principles like environmental sustainability, public participation, human rights and poverty reduction.

There are clear linkages between COP 17 at Durban and the 'green economy' agenda at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development which will take place in Rio next June. The current green economy is estimated at \$8 trillion, and while awareness is growing of the potential of the green

economy, converting this into economic growth and jobs has yet to become a reality. Creating incentives and rewarding countries for investing in renewable energy will be instrumental in making up the shortfall in emissions reductions needed to reach the 2 degree goal.

Achieving food security and climate justice is doable. Climate change is making a bad situation far worse but, even so, I believe that it comes down to political choices and policy decisions. If we believe that solving the problem of hunger and food security is a priority, a question of justice and fairness, then it is not beyond our power to resolve it.

And the fact is that action is urgently required. A situation where almost a billion people go hungry every day, where a further billion are malnourished, is an affront to us all. Progress here in Durban could build a strong momentum to put justice and equity at the heart of international responses to climate change as we prepare for the 20th anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit next June. We should not let this opportunity pass.

At every level on this continent people understand the impact of climate change because they are enduring it. I wish that in other parts of the world this was similar and that globally, we shared a sense of urgency to act.

I thank you.

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