

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The Inaugural Concern Worldwide Hunger Lecture

by Mary Robinson, President, Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice

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I am delighted to return to Belfast to give the Inaugural Concern Worldwide Hunger Lecture and to participate in these important discussions. I have had many occasions to see first hand the work of Concern in different continents, and I am glad they have chosen Belfast for this event. Memories of being back in Somalia in July 2011, when the UN declared famine in two regions there, are still vivid in my mind.

The world is a changed place since Ireland experienced first-hand the effects of food insecurity and famine. Unfortunately this does not mean that people elsewhere in the world are not still faced with the indignity and pain of hunger and under-nutrition. We are all agreed, across political and cultural divides, and at the highest levels of leadership, that no mother or father should have to see their children go hungry, still less, die of hunger. Yet it happens every day in our 21st century world. Although in many

cases we know how to solve the problem, we struggle to do so on a scale that can end this most avoidable of the world's crises.

The causes of hunger today are many and varied – conflict, poverty, bad governance, inequality, high food and fuel prices, climate change, and access to land and water.

In Yemen and Syria food insecurity is at critical levels due to internal conflict. An estimated 1 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria due to the impact of the continuing social upheaval on households and food distribution channels in several markets. In Yemen, about 5 million people are estimated to be severely food insecure and in need of emergency food assistance, as a result of high levels of poverty, prolonged conflict and high food and fuel prices.

In West Africa poor harvests due to changing weather patterns and rising cereal prices have seen an increase in food insecurity and under nutrition in the past year. Again this has been accentuated in Mali and neighbouring countries due to the impacts of political unrest. Across the Sahel temperatures are rising, with an increase of 1°C in the area's mean temperature over the past 40 years, resulting in droughts, floods and

unpredictable growing seasons. In the western Sahelian states 54% of the population is thought to have experienced five or more periods of major flooding since 1985. To further complicate matters, it has also been suggested that the pattern of increased drought and torrential rain may be accentuated by a one meter rise in sea-levels, which could affect the livelihoods of over 3 million people living in the coastal parts of the region.

Flooding destroys food stocks and crops, and creates favourable conditions for disease outbreaks, such as malaria, cholera, and other diarrheal diseases, that can aggravate malnutrition. Drought cripples crop yields and wipes out livestock herds, an important source of protein and nutrients in many arid countries. The significant links between climate, hunger and nutrition are increasingly being understood. A report by the *High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition* to the Committee on World Food Security this June highlighted the potential impacts of climate change on food security including both direct nutritional effects (changes in consumption quantities and composition) and livelihood effects (changes in employment opportunities and cost of acquiring adequate nutrition). It also made the link between climate change, conflict and food security noting that climate change is expected to increase conflicts over access to and control of resources such as land and water. It may

also exacerbate social and political volatility in regions where access to resources is restricted, for example water resources in west and central Asia and mobility of pastoralists in many parts of the developing world.

It is clear that solving the world food crisis is getting more difficult – the reality is complex and the causes of hunger are multiple. And unfortunately – our track record is simply not good enough.

The latest evidence that we are not making enough progress to tackle hunger is about to be published in the 2012 Global Hunger Index which is co-authored by Concern Worldwide. The Global Index will find that progress in reducing the proportion of hungry people in the world has been tragically slow. In fact, hunger on a global scale remains a serious problem, with 37 countries experiencing high levels of under nutrition and under-five mortality, as well as high proportions of children under 5 who are underweight. I find it particularly tragic to see children who are stunted, and to know that they may never reach their full physical and intellectual potential.

While all regions of the world have made some progress compared to the situation in 1990, some countries have regressed – including Cote d’Ivoire and North Korea, both countries I visited quite recently with the Elders. South Asia is struggling to sustain progress due in large measure to social inequalities and the low nutritional, educational and social status of women. In sub-Saharan Africa many countries and communities remain highly vulnerable to shocks associated with climate, food prices and political unrest.

The international community has pledged to eradicate hunger and captured this as a policy goal in MDG 1. However, with the 2015 deadline only three years away, there are still almost one billion hungry people in the world and under nutrition among mothers and children is the underlying cause of 3.5 million deaths every year.

Hunger and food security were priority issues in Rio this June where world leaders gathered at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development. The outcome document from the Conference reaffirms the *‘the right of everyone to have access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.’*

It also acknowledges that *‘food security and nutrition has become a pressing global challenge and, in this regard, we further reaffirm our commitment to enhancing food security and access to adequate, safe and nutritious food for present and future generations’*. What is more difficult to get global agreement on is the actions and resources needed to have a real impact on wiping out hunger.

One effective approach is to coordinate efforts, increase collaboration and work in a true global partnership. This is what was agreed in Accra in 2008 when the international community committed to strengthening country ownership of development processes; inclusive partnerships involving donors, developing countries and civil society; and delivering results through a focus on real and measurable impacts on development. There is no doubt that this is an important part of the solution and something to remain focused on in the years ahead.

However, innovative approaches are also needed if we are to truly make hunger history. The Scaling Up Nutrition Movement is something Tom Arnold and I are both directly involved with. It is a movement – not an initiative or a project - and it aims to revolutionise the way the world tackles under-nutrition. It does so

by catalysing action at all levels and across disciplines to achieve measureable results. With the support of this movement countries like Nigeria have pledged to save 1 million lives by 2015 and to redirect energy subsidies to fund social safety nets and nutrition programs for pregnant mothers. Working together countries can inspire each other, hold each other to account and share lessons learned.

I believe that to be truly revolutionary the SUN movement needs to focus on the role of women in addressing under-nutrition. It is women who get pregnant and breastfeed their babies – therefore they have to be the focus when we know that the first 1000 days from conception to the child’s second birthday are critical from a nutrition and child development perspective. Women grow food, harvest food, sell food and cook food to feed their families – you cannot tackle under-nutrition without placing them at the centre. This sounds more common sense than a revolutionary approach – but believe me it would constitute a significant mindset breakthrough.

Another important aspect of effective approaches is to make linkages between related policy areas. Again this sounds pretty obvious. But addressing hunger and nutrition is not just about growing food – it is about healthcare, access to credit and education, land tenure, climate change and participation and

effective governance at national and international levels. International agencies tend to look at problems in siloes and to develop technical solutions to distinct parts of the problem. Until we start to look at problems from the perspective of those experiencing them, and to respond to their needs and wants, we will continue to make only sporadic progress towards our objectives.

We need to look at the world through the eyes of a mother, the head of a poor household, a smallholder farmer and a poor slum dweller to really understand the subtle and interlinked causes of hunger. In this way problems that seemed technical become people's problems and as a result our response becomes more social, more human. I think this could be another mindset shift in our efforts to tackle hunger and under-nutrition.

The next 18 months provide us with a real window of opportunity to provide leadership and to catalyse action. Ireland will hold the Presidency of the EU in the first half of 2013 and the Taoiseach has pledged to use this opportunity to *'to draw attention to the links between food security, nutrition and climate change, while our British counterparts will use their Presidency of the G8 to do the same'*. This coincidence of Irish and UK leadership in the EU and the G8 provides an opportunity to mobilise actors in civil society,

business and all sectors of national and local government across the island of Ireland to play their part in driving a more ambitious agenda to eradicate hunger and under nutrition.

The Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice will be working with the Government of Ireland during the Presidency on a major conference to highlight the links between hunger, nutrition and climate justice with a view to informing the post 2015 development agenda. Work on shaping this post 2015 agenda began in Rio - with a decision to develop Sustainable Development Goals – and the review of the MDGs will take place in September 2013. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has recently put together a high level panel to advise on the global development agenda, taking into consideration new global challenges and reflecting on the experience gained in implementing the Millennium Development Goals.

I started by talking about the progress we have made in the last decade and the significant gaps that remain. Addressing these becomes even more difficult in light of the new global challenges mentioned above – including climate change, population growth, water scarcity and the rising price of food and energy.

The world's population is set to reach 9 billion by 2050 and, depending on how we manage diets and food waste, it is estimated that feeding this increased population will require an increase in grain production by as much as 70%. Over the same period, 25% of food production could be lost as a result of climate change, water scarcity and land degradation and this alone could result in an increase of up to 20% in the number of people going hungry.

It is clear that we need to learn from what we know works and be innovative, bold and revolutionary in our responses not just to hunger and under-nutrition but also to the underlying causes of these problems. For me, this means embracing a climate justice approach, putting people (and especially women) front and centre, safeguarding their rights and responding to their needs in an integrated and respectful manner. We also need more urgency and more empathy. A child dying of hunger in the 21st century accuses each of us of a failure in our humanity.

Ireland has shown and can continue to show leadership in this regard. The Irish Aid programme and aid agencies like Concern are recognised internationally for their leadership on tackling hunger. In 2013 we will have a platform for this leadership which we can and should use for the benefit of those whose voices are not heard.