

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Official Opening Remarks by President Michael D. Higgins

at

Hunger-Nutrition-Climate Justice Conference

Dublin Castle, 15 April 2013

Tanáiste, Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Is mór agam gurb ann don chomhdháil seo lena n-aibhsítear na ceangail atá ann idir cúrsaí ocrais, cúrsaí cothaithe agus cúrsaí cheartas aeráide. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Joe Costello as a chuireadh cineálta í a oscailt agus libhse go léir as an bhfíorchaoin fáilte sin.

[I am very pleased this conference highlighting the links between hunger, nutrition and climate justice is taking place. I thank Minister Joe Costello for his kind invitation to open it and thank you all for that warm welcome.]

I am also pleased to note that this symposium is not only an official event of the Irish Presidency of the EU but that this important event is jointly organised by the Department and the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, in cooperation with the World Food Programme and the Climate and Food Security Centre.

I am aware that a strong focus will be placed on ensuring that those most affected by the impacts of climate change in developing countries will be heard and as President of Ireland, I welcome, in particular, those delegates from Latin America, Africa and Asia who have travelled to share their experiences, knowledge and skills with us.

My hope is that this meeting in Dublin will produce such an emancipatory approach to what are urgent problems as will transform the debate.

Global hunger in the 21st century represents the grossest of human rights violations, and the greatest ethical challenge facing the global community. According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation which I visited earlier this year in Rome, while the world at the present time produces enough food to potentially feed its entire population, more than one billion people are undernourished, over two billion suffer from nutritional deficiencies, and almost six million children die every year from malnutrition or related diseases.

The source of this hunger is not a lack of food, but the moral affront of poverty,

created and sustained by gross inequalities across the world - inequalities of power, economics and technology. While we have witnessed some significant gains in poverty alleviation in the past two decades, notably in countries such as Brazil and India, there are far too many living in extreme deprivation condemned to lives of powerlessness and relentless hardship.

The majority of those suffering from hunger and malnutrition are small holders or landless people, mostly women and girls living in rural areas without access to production resources.

Although many people might imagine that deaths from hunger generally occur in times of famine and conflict, the fact is that only about 10% of these deaths are the result of armed conflicts, natural catastrophes or exceptional climatic conditions. The other 90% are victims of long term, chronic lack of access to adequate food which represents, I repeat, the great ethical failure of the current global system.

This food insecurity is in violation we must realize of the substantial international law which underpins the Right to Food, a right that is recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which states:

The right to food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access to adequate food or means for its procurement.

At the Rome Declaration on World Food Security in 1996 Ireland joined other nations in reaffirming its commitment to ensure the Right to Food is realised at the global level.

Subsequently, the UN Economic and Social Council produced General Comment 12 on the Right to Adequate Food in 1999. The Comment sets out the necessary steps to be taken by States and civil society to respect, protect, facilitate and fulfil the right to food. These commitments and the Right to Food Guidelines of 2004 oblige States to take preventative and pro-active steps to ensure that adequate food is available and accessible to all those in their jurisdictions.

In spite of these commitments and obligations, hunger and food insecurity are on the increase. According to the FAO, the three central reasons behind this increase are the neglect of small holder agriculture, the global economic recession and the significant increase in food prices which have placed food out of reach of so many of the world's poor.

The goal of course is not just to produce more food, but to ensure that each child has access to adequate nutrition – to a sustainable diet that will allow each child to grow and thrive and to reach their full potential in life.

We now have high level political commitment and leadership from the UN Secretary General through the Zero Hunger Challenge and through the Scaling Up Nutrition movement. It is crucial that we build on that political commitment.

The compelling reality is that proper nutrition makes a contribution to simultaneously meeting several of the Millennium Development Goals - most prominently across the vital areas of improving maternal health, reducing and minimising child mortality and getting children into and through the formal education process.

No area, however more succinctly raises the moral question. Can words be translated into actions? When commitments are betrayed in the name of interest, national or global, the hungry and poor of the world are twice smitten.

Climate change presents another complex layer of challenges to the nutrition imperative. Extreme climate events, ever more frequent, undermine the ability of many of the world's poorest people to earn a decent living sufficient to secure a sustainable diet of sufficient nutritional quality.

Michael Jacobs in a recent article in [The Social Europe Journal](#) quotes the World Bank which warned recently that the present emissions trends will lead to global warming of at least 4 degrees centigrade by the middle of the century, triggering "a cascade of cataclysmic changes" including more frequent weather-related disasters, declining global food stocks and sea-level rise affecting hundreds of millions of people, and he quotes the Stern Report which suggested that even leaving aside the human cost, the economic losses caused by such events would be equivalent in this century to the cost of the two world wars and Great Depression of the last.

But the crisis is wider than this. An index of the prices of 33 commodities, ranging from iron ore, copper and aluminium to soybeans, coffee and cotton, from 1900 to 2010 shows a remarkable phenomenon. For a hundred years to just after 2000, commodity prices fell by on average 1.2% per annum, amounting to an overall reduction over the century of 70%. But in the last ten years that entire one hundred year fall in price has been erased, by a surge in prices almost twice as great as that which occurred during the Second World War.

Climate change is not an abstract phenomenon featuring in arcane science journals and measured only in laboratories. It is present everywhere and perhaps most harshly and adversely in environments where people are least equipped to meet its force and ill effects – and least responsible for its causes.

According to the United Nations Human Development Report (2011), countries with low Human Development Indices have contributed the least to global climate change, but they have experienced the greatest loss in rainfall and the greatest increase in its variability with implications for agricultural production and livelihoods and poverty reduction.

Even as we speak, the least fortunate on the planet are already bearing the brunt of past emissions. And our generation in some senses bears a heavier responsibility than earlier generations.

We, unlike those who went before us, cannot say that we did not know the consequences. If present consumption patterns continue, two thirds of the world's population will live in 'water-stressed' conditions by 2025 and 3.5 planet Earths would be needed to sustain a global population if we were to mimic the current lifestyle of the average European or North American (World Water Assessment Programme (2012)).

It is projected that world food production will need to increase in the order of 60% to 70% by 2050 if we are to meet the needs of that year's world population of 9 billion people. Yet the overall impact of climate change will see an increase in extreme weather events in vulnerable areas of the world. Food security will increasingly rely on agriculture systems already at great risk of adverse change and exposed to lower yields.

What type of response will ensure the Right to Food and promote sustainable equitable development?

If we are to stand in solidarity with the world's poor and ensure they have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, a number of fundamental issues must be confronted.

One of the most difficult challenges facing policy makers is to achieve a sustainable solution that takes account of the water, food and energy relationship with each other, their connectedness.

Within this relationship are changing patterns of land holding and acquisition, the diversion of land use from food production to fuel provision.

The lack of any supranational regulating or monitoring mechanism for land acquisitions has enabled the acreage of transnational land acquisitions to rise from 15 – 20 million hectares in 2009 to more than 70 million in 2012. Africa is the prime target for these deals, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for two thirds of this acreage. The World Water Assessment Programme tells us that :

“Poorly regulated foreign investments in lands that could otherwise be used to feed local populations could potentially have devastating consequences on the fragile state of domestic food security.”

According to the International Land Coalition:

“Corrupt practices, behind-the-door negotiations, illegal evictions of traditional land-owners and violence against community are all common

features of the current phenomenon of large-scale land acquisitions.”
Niasse, M. (2012) A World of Science 10 (2) p 15

Where such interventions are in pursuit of production of bio-fuels, they have, in many cases, caused deforestation, threatened biodiversity, increased food prices and decreased food stock: the International Monetary Fund estimates that the rise in demand for bio-fuels accounted for 70% of the hike in maize prices and 40% of that for soya bean prices between 2006 and 2008. (World Water Assessment Programme (2012) Managing Water under Uncertainty and Risk).

The current pace of land acquisitions and the related concessions of water rights to investors also carry great threats for trans-boundary co-operation in many river systems, including those of the Nile, Niger and Senegal basins.

We must recognise the particular vulnerability of smallholder farmers, pastoralists and fishing communities. Faced with shrinking productive resources, they are on the frontline of shocks and extreme weather events which are having a direct impact on their livelihoods and food and nutrition security.

What is urgently required is a robust regulatory framework which protects our fragile and threatened environment and which respects the right of small landholders to remain on their land and retain access to water sources. Such regulation needs to be developed collaboratively and transparently involving practitioners from developing countries, such as those here today and which is respectful of, and responsive to, their lived experiences.

We also need to urgently address how we transform and transcend the unjust nature of women's experience. Equal access to productive resources must be guaranteed for women. They comprise the majority of smallholder farmers in developing countries. Control of resources such as land and credit is vital, as is influence in decision-making.

This will mean developing new programmes and policies that are responsive to women's realities and their needs as carers and breadwinners. I agree with the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter who has said:

“Food security strategies should be judged on their ability to challenge gender roles and to truly empower women. Gender sensitivity is important, but it is not a substitute for empowerment.”

The UN Special Rapporteur has called on States to implement multiyear transformative food security strategies that promote full equality for women by working to redistribute traditional gender roles and responsibilities.

While there are those who continue to advocate for the De Soto model on land tenure which proposes using land as collateral for private bank loans, that model, I suggest,

is a source of dispossession of women farmers of their fields and livelihoods and the enrichment of private banks at the expense of state credit.

There are structural issues within global financial arrangements too which need to be addressed. The Irish public, perhaps due to historical experience of famine, responds generously to appeals for those afflicted by hunger and under-nutrition. Yet one may observe a striking paradox. On the one hand, famine and deprivation can move not only the Irish but the global community to deep compassion and elicit generous responses. On the other hand, international trade and finance arrangements which undermine small landholders in the developing countries and threaten their livelihoods persist. Such arrangements continue in spite of decades of discussion and advocacy on these unsustainable and unequal arrangements.

Global consciousness has not yet engaged the contradiction between our compassionate instincts and the structures of narrow interests it chooses to support through silent indifference or even collusion.

Speculation in food commodities is a dramatic illustration of this contradiction. Such speculation has contributed to dramatic price increases for basic foodstuffs across the developing world. Professor Howard Stein of the University of Michigan has demonstrated for instance, that while in the 1990's only 12% of the wheat futures market was held by speculators, this grew to 61% in 2011.

The result, says Professor Stein, 'was a steep rise in food prices which more than doubled between June 2003 and June 2008.' The impact on food consumers in poor African countries is stark: in a survey of 58 developing countries, food prices were up by 56% between 2007 and 2010 placing millions more at risk of malnutrition and hunger.

Further, capital is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few corporations in the food sector as Action Aid International reported in 2005: five companies control 90% of the world's grain trade, six companies control nearly 80% of the world pesticide market, three companies control 85% of the world's tea market, two companies control 50% of the world trade in bananas, and three companies control almost 80% of the confectionary market. (Action Aid International (2005) Power Hungry: Six Reasons to Regulate Global Food Companies).

While the efforts now being attempted to put in place, through the G20, an agriculture markets information system which will provide transparency in key commodity markets is a welcome practical intervention, the moral and ethical issues of speculation in food stuffs even during times of famine remain.

We must not lose the opportunity to put the stamp of our shared humanity on these challenges. The institutional and structural reforms that are necessary are now more urgent than ever.

There are of course too acknowledged issues of uneven and price distorting agricultural subsidies in all their complexity, and issues of technology transfer and dependency which will no doubt come in for discussion over the next two days.

Conclusion

Ireland, through the Government's development programme, Irish Aid, and through the work of its NGO community, has been working assiduously to improve the awareness of inter-linkages and outcomes in human and economic development. This is in line with an emerging global consensus among informed scholars and practitioners. This trend stresses the need for an integrated and comprehensive approach to addressing food security *and* nutrition security in the right to food - through linking agriculture, food security and nutrition interventions.

Mar fhocal scoir, tá mé sásta go léiríonn Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar an AE, mar is cuí di a léiriú, an riactanas polaitiúil atá ann go suífear an tOcras agus an Tearc-Choithú i gcroílár ár gcuid iarrachtaí. Coinneofar sé seo sa tsiúl, ní amháin go dhá mhíle is a cúig déag, an tráth a dtiocfaidh deireadh leis an gclár-ama do Spriocanna Forbartha na Mílaoise; ach níos faide amach ná sin, tráth a dtiocfaidh ann d'fhoireann nua spriocanna domhanda de thoradh pléití agus comhairliúchán atá faoi láthair faoi shiúl go hidirnáisiúnta. Ba chóir go mbeadh tionchar ag torthaí na comhdhála luachmhaire seo, agus ag torthaí bhur bpléití, ar an gceartais a bheas ann tar éis 2015, agus ar chruth an chreata ceartais sin.

[In conclusion, I am pleased that Ireland's EU Presidency reflects, quite properly, the political imperative to place Hunger and Under-Nutrition at the centre of our efforts. This will be sustained, not only until 2015 when the timescale for the Millennium Development Goals concludes, but afterwards, when a new set of successor global goals will emerge from discussions and consultations now underway internationally. The results of this valuable Conference and your deliberations should inform and shape this post 2015 framework for global justice.]

I am delighted to formally open this conference and wish you well in your deliberations. Thank you.