

Check Against Delivery

Irish Primary Principals' Network Annual Principals' Conference

Citywest Convention Centre, Co. Dublin

Remarks by Mary Robinson

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I am delighted to be here at IPPN's Annual Principals' conference.

Your invitation caused me to think of my most recent visit to a primary school. It was last February, in the Delta region of Bangladesh. The school, run by BRAC, a Bangladesh NGO, was for the poorest children, most of them displaced by flooding caused by a severe cyclone. The school itself was a happy and empowering place for the 35 pupils of different ages. They wanted to perform a short play for me: about how a cyclone came and they learned to cope, to seek shelter, and to rebuild their lives. As I watched these imaginative children play out the reality they have to cope with, it dawned on me that every primary school in the world should be encouraging children to respond actively to climate change.

Let me start where you might expect a former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to begin:

Article 26 of the UN Declaration for Human Rights states that:

(1) Everyone has the right to education

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms

It is the second part of this article I will focus on as I introduce you to the work of my Foundation and the concept of climate justice.

I need not remind this audience that education is indispensable to the just society or of its ability to draw those in receipt of it towards a fuller understanding of the world, deepening their awareness both of themselves and of those around them. These are challenging times for all involved in education in Ireland, as they are across all sectors of Irish society. However, we must not lose sight of the promise to ‘cherish all the children of the nation equally’. An education system that supports the vulnerable and disadvantaged and delivers equality of opportunity for all is central to a fair and just society. To state that primary level education should be a priority, in terms of investment and innovation, at a primary principal’s conference might be deemed populist but that does not make it any less true. Education for active citizenship, so that our children can shape the type of society they would choose to live in, cannot begin early enough.

In these times of economic uncertainty it is not surprising that attention focuses on our immediate problems: cutbacks, debt and financial survival. In hard times it can be difficult to attend to the long term. 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 experiencing right here, right now. When respected institutions such as the OECD and the International Energy Agency, who are not given to alarmist statements, warn that failure to face up to the problems posed by climate change could result in irreversible damage, we must all give the issue our fullest attention.

Climate change is a complex, multifaceted problem. It has far reaching impacts on every part of the world and it hits the poorest countries and peoples hardest. I first became critically aware of the justice impacts of climate change when I was researching some of the works of Barbara Ward. She was an eminent intellectual, moral voice, visionary, and superb communicator, who established the International Institute for Environment & Development (IIED) in London in 1973. Her great insight was that environment and development were inextricably linked and she argued forcefully for development that offered hope both for today's poor and tomorrow's children. Her legacy should guide us all as we wrestle with climate change and it certainly guides me when I seek the human rights dimension in any given policy area – including climate change.

I believe that a human centred approach to climate change is the only way to tackle this grave problem and I will explain what I mean by that and what my Foundation is doing to achieve it.

Firstly, what is 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. Climate justice is informed by science, responds to science and acknowledges the need for equitable stewardship of the world's resources.

Climate justice has a focus on people – it looks at the causes, the impacts and the solutions to the problem from a human perspective. Climate justice is fully informed by science but it communicates and identifies solutions from the perspective of human needs and rights. As such it seeks equity in the way in which we deal with the negative impacts of climate change (for example, which countries take the lead on cutting greenhouse gas emissions) and equity in accessing benefits (for example, access to off-grid renewable energy for communities living without access to electricity).

The theme that you have chosen for this conference – ‘Forging a Future’ – could not be more apt for a climate justice perspective. Our work at the Foundation is informed by principles of climate

justice, one of which seeks to ‘harness the transformative power of education for climate stewardship’. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that education has the power to equip future generations with the skills and knowledge they will need to meet the challenges that climate change poses.

The concept of ‘intergenerational justice’ is not too large a leap for a principal who may have had two generations of the same family pass through the school gate. Forty years from now, your fifth and sixth class students will be leading our society and making decisions that will have far-reaching implications for the generation that follows them. Why should the burden of unmanageable climate change fall on those yet to be born when today, in 2012, we know what the consequences of our failure to act will be?

The most frequently used definition of sustainable development comes from the Brundtland Report: ‘sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. In light of all that we know about climate change, can we honestly say that development in the western world over the past 20 years has been of the ‘sustainable’ kind? It is therefore incumbent on us all to ask: what is the responsibility of the current generation to future generations? To shirk our responsibilities and do nothing is unthinkable, it is not an

option. We must begin to imagine the future we want for the 9 billion people who will live on this planet in 2050.

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 – both by reducing our own use of carbon and by supporting developing countries and communities to adapt their livelihoods, protect their resources and embrace low carbon development.

This is the work of my foundation, the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice (MRF CJ). MRF CJ's first full year in operation, 2011, culminated in our participation at COP 17 in Durban, South Africa.

The world went into COP17 in Durban with low expectations. On the cards was the future of the process, a successor to the Kyoto Protocol due to expire in December 2012 and the need to deliver concrete actions for the people of the host continent, Africa. In the first week I was struck by the complete lack of urgency in the formal negotiations, contrasting with the real urgency being voiced on the street, by scientists and by organisations representing the most vulnerable communities from all over the world. I met some of the 200+ participants in the so-called 'Caravan of Hope' when I arrived in Durban. They were farmers, fisher folk, herders, artists, musicians and students and they desperately wanted their voices to be heard.

Starting out in Burundi, they travelled from 10 African countries to bring their experiences of climate change to COP 17.

Thankfully the message finally got through in the final days of the second week – the need to deliver a result, ‘to avoid the death of the Kyoto Protocol on African soil’, and to set a deadline for a new all-inclusive legal agreement to succeed Kyoto, was acknowledged and acted on. Alliances were formed – most notably between the EU, the least developed countries and the small island developing states – and this put significant pressure on the naysayers to stand aside and let progress be made. It was the longest COP in history, going on 2 days longer than expected – and the result it delivered is important – BUT it will only help to solve the problem if it delivers on the promise that has been made.

MRFCJ has focused on three priority areas in the past year and I would like to discuss these in a little more detail.

The first is the issue of legal form of a new climate agreement – From a Climate Justice perspective, we, in MRFCJ, have argued for a legally binding international agreement as the only way to hold countries to account and to ensure that actions are taken to protect the most vulnerable. Without a legally binding agreement there is no obligation to act. Without a global agreement that includes all countries there is a risk that the voices of the most

vulnerable will not be heard, and that the biggest polluters won't do their fair share.

Durban delivered a commitment to develop '*a new protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force*' by 2015 which would come into force by 2020. We now have all countries of the world (including major polluters like the US who didn't ratify the Kyoto Protocol) committed to working together as part of a multilateral process to develop a new legal agreement.

The second priority issue for MRFCJ in 2011 was food security and agriculture. In recent years we have seen all too starkly the impact that extreme events such as floods and droughts can have on those least able to cope. I visited Somalia 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. More than half of those who died are believed to be children. The U.N. says 250,000 Somalis are still at risk of starvation and more than 13 million people need aid while four million remain in need of assistance on a regular basis, including food aid, health care and water and

sanitation services. Severe and recurrent drought was a major cause of the famine, and Somalia and the rest of the Horn of Africa had experienced the 8 hottest years ever in succession.

The response of the Irish public to aid agencies' appeals for financial assistance last August was a reminder of our fundamental decency in spite of personal circumstances and of our refusal to do nothing in the face of such terrible human suffering. When I addressed the Houses of the Oireachtas in 1995 on *Cherishing the Irish Diaspora* I said that 'none are a greater source of pride than the missionaries and aid workers who bring such dedication, humour and practical commonsense to often very demanding work'. That remains true today. We should also remember that both missionaries and NGOs have contributed greatly to the advancement of development education in our schools. Their hands-on experiences have helped to inform our understanding of the developing world and to highlight the vast gulf in resources between rich and poor.

Across the world farmers are experiencing unpredictable growing seasons, making the age old art and science of farming a guessing game. It is estimated that by 2050 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.

The links between climate change and food security have been clear for some time and at Durban the challenge was to reflect the importance of food security and agriculture in the work of the Convention. In 2012 Parties will consider how best to support a process to address the impacts of climate change on food and nutrition security and the role of climate smart agriculture in finding ways to grow food under changing climatic conditions while safeguarding the environment and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Ireland has the potential to make a significant contribution in this area drawing on domestic agriculture expertise and our international work on food and nutrition security.

A particular aspect of food and nutrition security that links to our third priority issue (gender and climate change) is the role of women in food production and land management. 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 percent of the land.

This takes me to MRFCJ's third priority - women's leadership - through which we highlight the gender dimensions of climate change with the aim of supporting more gender equitable climate policies and actions. We know that gender blind actions in the past yielded poor results. Through decades of development work we have learned that to be successful we need to target women for agricultural training services and to maintain water pumps and irrigation systems, as they are often the ones responsible for these activities. Likewise if we are to find effective solutions to climate change we will have to include all those that can make a difference, men and women. Ignoring or undervaluing the contribution of women restricts our potential for innovation and our capacity to act.

During COP17 I worked with an inspiring set of women leaders to highlight these issues. Through a Troika+ of women leaders including the COP President, Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, former COP President Patricia Espinosa from Mexico and Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, the tone was set from the first day of the COP when Maite said in her opening remarks – *“because we now have women leaders at the helm of this COP the outgoing President, a woman and a very capable woman, Executive Secretary, a woman and a capable woman and the incoming president....it is a very nice coincidence so we will not give up this opportunity to make use of it”*.

And make use of it they did.... Christiana Figueres held a COP women's day on the 5th December to highlight the impacts of climate change on women and women's role in responding to the challenge. Then, on the 7th December, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane and I co-hosted a meeting of women leaders to look at how the gender dimensions of climate change were being addressed in the texts under negotiation in Durban. The event convened a large number of high profile women leaders including Connie Hedegaard EU Commissioner for Climate Action, US Ambassador-at-large Melanne Verveer, Christiana Figueres, ministers and directors of UN and other international organisations. We will continue work on this theme in 2012 by connecting these women leaders with grassroots organisations to access real experiences and increase the effectiveness of their collective policy influencing.

So, overall where does COP 17 leave us in our quest for climate justice?

Firstly the door is open for a new international and inclusive legally binding agreement to solve the climate change problem.

Secondly we need to keep on the pressure and increase the sense of urgency so that by 2015 Parties are ready to make ambitious commitments to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

Thirdly, we made progress on issues of importance to climate justice including gender equality and food and nutrition security. Both of these issues reflect the Principles of Climate Justice which underpin the work of MRFCJ and help to communicate the human impacts of climate change and demonstrate the need for solutions which are informed by human rights.

A new roadmap has been set for seriously addressing climate change; we should all play our part by putting pressure on the world's leaders to take on their responsibilities.

Equally, we must be cognisant of our own responsibilities – climate justice starts at home. The energy we use, the forms of transport we choose, the decisions we take for the economy, the degree to which we diagnose the consequences of our actions – should all be closely scrutinised. The Green Schools initiative is a wonderful environmental programme at primary level. It encourages a sense of personal responsibility among students and increases awareness of environmental issues from litter and waste to energy and biodiversity. I understand that a role on the green schools committee is akin to a T.D. being returned to the Dáil in her first outing. Children want to be part of the decision-making process and the Green Schools initiative allows them to do so, fostering a sense of citizenship that spreads beyond the school and into the wider community.

The Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education at St. Patrick's College Drumcondra has just embarked on a research project which involves both a scoping study in teacher education colleges and the development of a climate justice resource for primary level. I will follow the progress of their research with interest.

If education is in part the telling of stories, the story of climate justice has just begun. Stories told in primary classrooms have the potential to resonate long after the student has left the school building. They are brought home and shared with families over an evening meal and homework. Children are important agents of change and they have an innate sense of social justice. As educational leaders you have a responsibility to tell your students the story of how climate change is affecting them, and affecting more severely children like those I saw in the Bangladesh primary school. You have a responsibility to explain the burdens and benefits of climate change and how it will impact on the enjoyment of human rights. Climate Justice is a valuable teaching project because it links the scientific aspects of climate change with the human dimensions.

My friend and hero Nelson Mandela has said that '*education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*' When you return to your schools, I encourage you to begin a discussion about climate justice in your staff rooms and in your classrooms. Finding a space for climate justice

education in the primary school curriculum is your challenge. I hope that I have made a persuasive case for its inclusion and that together we will continue a conversation about climate change that focuses on the rights and needs of the most vulnerable.