

Check against Delivery

FREEDOM AND SOLIDARITY FORUM
CAEN, FRANCE, JUNE 5, 2014

PANEL 5: RETHINKING THE ECONOMY OF THE FUTURE

ADDRESS BY MARY ROBINSON
05 JUNE

Seventy years on, the anniversary tomorrow will be filled with special memories. Here is just one from my own country. The Irish Red Cross had established itself in Normandy for humanitarian assistance and one of their ambulance drivers was the writer Samuel Beckett.

Following D-day and the Overlord Operation on the beaches of Normandy, world leaders were faced with challenges that must have felt insurmountable: rebuilding regions devastated by war, maintaining a hard-won peace and somehow igniting economic growth. In 1944 and 1945 leaders did not shy away from these mammoth tasks, but, armed with the mantra of “never again”, they were galvanized to take transformative action, putting in place measures, structures and international laws such as the Charter of the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, the Marshall Plan and laying the foundations for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Post-war leaders had the sheer will and power to act, setting out to create a peaceful and prosperous world.

Fast-forward to today.

In 2014 and 2015 we face challenges of a similar order of magnitude. The impacts of a warming world are already being felt, and the injustice of this is that those most acutely affected are those least responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions that fuel the crisis, the poor, vulnerable and marginalised around the world. To put it starkly the physical world faces potential catastrophe because of climate change and we are running out of time to take the necessary corrective action.

We need rapidly and equitably to make the transition to a carbon neutral world. This is the only way to avoid the consequences of a world that is three to four degrees warmer than pre-industrial levels. These consequences were spelled out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in recent months and include more extreme weather shocks, rising food insecurity, the spread of disease, higher levels of poverty and instability. We simply cannot have a peaceful, prosperous and inclusive future unless we act as a global community to prevent dangerous climate change.

The scale of the challenge requires direction equivalent to the leadership shown in the immediate post-war years. The current economic model is incapable of averting this disaster. We need to change our economic systems – how we produce energy, how we use our land and other natural resources, how we transport people and goods, and how we live, eat and work – if our children and grandchildren are to survive. These are the issues that need to top the agenda of any discussion on the economy of the future.

In 2006 the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change showed that the benefits of strong, early action on climate change considerably outweigh the costs. Unfortunately the world has not yet embraced the strong collective action the report advised, and during the delay climate impacts have intensified and lives and livelihoods have been lost.

The economic transition required does not have to place limits on growth, rather it can catalyze benefits, in the short and long term, that are sustainable, and with care, shared fairly amongst the people and countries of the world. Earlier this week President Obama showed his commitment to this transition by regulating greenhouse gas emissions from power stations - potentially transforming the US electricity sector .

The New Climate Economy, with a Commission led by former President Calderon of Mexico, will present the benefits of this economic transition in a report to be released at the UN Secretary General's Climate Summit this September.

Many investors and business leaders have already realized the benefits that accrue from investing in the climate economy – new investments in clean energy will provide multiple benefits yielding significant returns in the form of reduced fuel costs and creating jobs. Research by the International Trade Union Federation ITUC shows that 48 million new jobs could be created in just 12 countries through an industrial revolution focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

If we are to avoid dangerous climate change and ensure climate justice, we need to prioritise a rapid and equitable transition to renewable energy and the phasing out of fossil fuels so that they become stranded assets, like asbestos, simply too toxic to exploit. We need to shift our patterns of consumption and production towards sustainability, minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials, minimising waste. This does not necessarily mean consuming less or compromising quality of life, it means consuming in a more informed way: more efficiently with less risk to our health and environment. It means re-evaluating the products we consume using emerging initiatives, for example, assessing the negative impacts and benefits of products throughout their life cycle with a view to moving towards sustainable production.

Significantly, we need to ensure that the changes we make to our economic systems, and the transition we make to a carbon neutral world, are *equitable*, bearing in mind the different development stages of countries in the world. Climate change is a global problem requiring a global response. While there are significant differences in responsibility for the causes of the problem and in the distribution of the impacts, all countries have to be part of the solution. To ensure an equitable transition, concessions will need to be given, initially, to the least developed countries so that they do not have to move so quickly. The more developed economies, therefore, will have to move all the more rapidly. As in the post-war period, we need to act in solidarity with our fellow human beings sharing this planet, and in solidarity with those generations to come and whose future lies in our hands. We need the urgent

drive and vision of young people around the world to build the political momentum for the changes which have to be made.

While the scale of the challenge requires leadership equivalent to that shown in the post-war years, the structure of power has changed. Governments remain the key actors in global decision-making, but they are not the only holders of power. The power of the corporate sector has risen dramatically in recent decades. Significant actors within the corporate sector promote fossil fuels, and some have even corrupted the science to deny the scale of the potential catastrophe. Corporations must be part of climate solutions in partnership with governments and citizens around the world. Political will is key to catalyzing this partnership and delivering global action through solidarity.

The significance of 2014 and 2015 is that these are the years in which world leaders will negotiate a post 2015 development agenda and a new legally binding climate agreement. These processes will set the course for global development in the coming three to four decades. This is a rare opportunity carrying significant responsibility. Leaders today need to emulate the conviction and resolve of post-war leaders and articulate a new vision of sustainable development, putting in place policies and laws that will ensure the required transformation.

Business needs policy certainty in order to accelerate the move to renewable energy, increased energy efficiency and provision of the jobs which will come with

innovation at all levels. Access to renewable energy will bring huge benefits to the staggering 1.3 billion of the world's poorest people who totally lack electricity and the 2.6 billion who still cook on charcoal, wood or biomass, with a terrible toll on their health. Far from being afraid of transformative change we should realize that the results can be overwhelmingly positive and contribute to the protection of human rights, sustainable development and increased equality.

The groundbreaking authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, informed by the real and felt experience of war, articulated a vision of the rights that every person around the world would hold, regardless of their nationality or race, culture or religion. The survivors of Typhoon Hyian and Superstorm Sandy, and of recurrent droughts in the Horn of Africa and rising sea levels in the Pacific Islands, know all too well the reality of climate change. But many people have yet to experience these impacts and while they may empathise at the time of disasters with those affected, the felt experience that often drives transformational economic and social change is absent. Our challenge, the challenge facing our leaders today, is to link the scientific facts and projected climate impacts with the felt experience of those most vulnerable to climate change, to catalyse the same political will as in the post war years. This time it must be political will forged by a broad alliance incorporating governments, multi-national organisations, business and civil society, particularly women and young people.

In rethinking the economy of the future, it is now time to commit to a world unconstrained by carbon emissions and to work backwards from there, identifying and taking the steps we need to take to have a fair pathway to that carbon neutral world. This is not purely a technical challenge; it is fundamentally a moral and political challenge, because it has to be done fairly bearing in mind the different development stages of the countries of the world.

Let me conclude with the prophetic words of Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai:
‘In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called upon to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground’

That time is now!