

**Event - Closing the Gender Gap in Agriculture**

**Organisers: FAO, IDLO, IFAD, IFPRI, WFO and WFP**

**Keynote Speech by Mary Robinson on eve of International Women's Day, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2014.**

**10.15-10.25, FAO Green Room, Rome**

**Justice, rights and the rule of law at the centre of the effective responses to hunger, undernutrition and climate change**

I am delighted to return to Rome to participate in this important event and I thank the organisers for the invitation. I have fond memories of speaking at a similar event in March 1997 as President of Ireland, when it was also held on Friday 7<sup>th</sup>! In the intervening years considerable progress has been made, but International Women's Day provides us with an opportunity to highlight the inequalities which many women still face around the world. It is this global gender gap which must be addressed.

While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states at the outset "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", gender inequality still persists in every society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is no surprise, then, that equality for girls and women is a core focus of our work as The Elders, and it is a core principle of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice.

Equality is a broad subject, so focussing on the problem through the common lens of agriculture and food security allows us, to come up with effective solutions that can be implemented. It is very encouraging to see the increasing attention to the importance of enhancing the role of women in agriculture. I participated at a meeting of EWA, Empowering Women in Agriculture, at the African Union Summit in Addis in January, chaired by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. It was impressive to see the research and broad collaboration that is emerging in Africa. 2014 marks the African Union's Year of Agriculture and Food Security, and women's role and empowerment is central to that.

I am pleased that at this event new findings about the different roles of women and men in food and nutrition security, and their policy and programmatic implications, will be presented and discussed. At the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, we have worked on highlighting the themes of food and nutrition security and women's empowerment. For global development to be sustainable, the issues of climate change, gender equality and food security must all go hand-in-hand.

This is the core of a climate justice approach – which links human rights, development and climate change in a people centred response to these interlinked challenges. At the household and community level the reasons why people are poor, hungry, under nourished or powerless are many and varied. You can't solve hunger merely by agricultural interventions alone. You also

have to establish rights and support adaptation to the impacts of climate change. It is only at the national and international level that we design responses in boxes rather than for real people. Our '*boxes*' approach has had some results but it has not transformed lives on the scale needed. A climate justice approach can, I believe, help to turn the tide.

Let me share Jannet Avako's story with you. Jannet is a widow with 5 children who lives in Aliamu village in Uganda. She has always been poor, but when her husband died she was left with nothing. She was chased off her husband's land and had no way to earn a living. She was destitute, her children had no bedding, she had no latrine and no bathing shed. Her family were surviving on one meal a day and she couldn't afford to send her children to school. She lost all respect and considered suicide.

The turning point for her was when she heard a local development organisation, AFARD, say that all people, both men and women, widowed or not, have rights to the basics in life; food, water, housing. Up until this point she had no idea that she, a widowed woman, had the same rights as a married woman, or even a man. An understanding of her rights – and the support she received from a rights based organisation – helped her to grow in confidence, and to access the support she needed to become a successful farmer and to send all of her children to school.

Jannet keeps goats and sells them to buy the things she needs like materials to build her house or a mattress to sleep on. Her first child will soon go to secondary school as a boarder and her youngest child is attending nursery school. By diversifying her crops and intercropping maize and soya bean, Jannet is managing the risks associated with climate change: unpredictable seasons, and more frequent droughts and flash floods. With the income earned from selling the soya beans, she has been able to rent additional land and hires extra labour to help her.

Jannet is proud again. She can provide for her family, she is a respected member of her community and she is attending adult literacy classes. At the end of the conversation, Jannet wanted to have her photograph taken, dressed in the uniform that signals that she is attending adult education classes and holding a shovel and axe, men's tools that signal her ability to farm her land, build her own latrine and care for her family.

Rights matter. The Right to Food is not an abstract commitment. It is fact of life and something we are committed to providing for every man, woman and child on the planet. We can no longer treat it as an aspiration.

We need to link local communities and indigenous knowledge with policy makers at the national and international level. In April 2013 my Foundation and the Irish Government co-hosted the Hunger – Nutrition – Climate Justice conference, held in Ireland during its Presidency of the European Union.

Thanks in no small part to the hard work of fellow organisers, the World Food Programme and the CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security, the conference successfully brought together grassroots community representatives with international policy makers for real world discussions on the links between hunger, under nutrition and climate change.

At the conference I was struck by the vital need for women to be at the heart of effective solutions to the crisis they face. The conference showed what women can achieve when they are given the opportunity to contribute. Etrida Luhanga, a smallholder farmer from Malawi, told her 300 fellow delegates “we are the owners of this work”. She made the argument that as the owners, their involvement in decision making on climate change and development goals is critical. We can’t keep half the population outside the door.

At the conference we also heard strong emphasis on women’s rights and how in many cases an absence of rights to own land, to participate in decision making or to access credit, reduces women’s capacity to withstand climate shocks and, as a result, to feed their families.

Even though women farmers are responsible for between 60 and 80 per cent of food production in developing countries, their rights and socioeconomic status are rarely equal to those of men, and this disempowerment undermines their ability to attain food and nutritional security. 870 million people still suffer from hunger, most of them women and children. Under-nutrition

among mothers and children is the underlying cause of 2.5 million deaths every year. If we accept that malnutrition is rooted in political and cultural inequalities that lead to poverty and the disempowerment of women, we also accept that malnutrition is a rights issue and a good proxy indicator for development.

Rural women are highly dependent on subsistence agriculture to feed their families, however their access to natural resources such as land, water and wood is often limited. Discrimination, resulting from laws or social norms and customs, and lower levels of access to education (among other factors), restrict women's access to credit, agricultural inputs, technologies and services.

As a member of the International Advisory Council of the IDLO, I was delighted to take part in an IDLO workshop on the Rule of Law, Climate Change and Sustainable Development during COP19 in Warsaw last November. There was broad consensus that the absence of laws which protect the rights of women is a key barrier to achieving sustainable development, particularly in the face of climate change.

The 2013 Environment and Gender Index of the International Union for Conservation of Nature sets out the discrimination women often face in accessing, owning and controlling land due to varying levels of legal protection, as well as cultural non-acceptance of women's land rights. For example,

widows in many countries face barriers in inheriting land owned by their deceased husband. Gender stereotypes can also prevent many women from obtaining the credit needed to buy new land. Often, women have access to less fertile land as a result, making them seem 'less productive' than their male counterparts.

The unpredictable reality of climate change compounds these problems. Women with fewer rights find it more difficult to adapt to changing weather patterns due to the forced circumstances in which they find themselves - such as the inability to own or inherit land, grow crops of their choosing or have a say in how land is harvested. At the IDLO workshop we discussed how the rule of law can contribute to a stronger response to climate change in a way that supports sustainable development. Climate change exacerbates the vulnerability of urban and rural communities already suffering from unequal protection of the law and a lack of access to justice.

When women are empowered, not only do they become more productive, as studies have shown, but as the main source of food for their children, they give future generations a better start in life.

I am pleased to serve as a member of the Lead Group of the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement. From the beginning we placed emphasis on the need to bring out the gender dimensions of food and nutrition, and the importance of empowering women. Countries in the SUN Movement are making significant

headway in addressing nutrition, including through the rule of law. Kenya and Vietnam have recently passed robust legislation to protect and promote breastfeeding and Madagascar has a network of women parliamentarians for nutrition. Nutrition justice will only be achieved when women are empowered and when policies and programmes are gender responsive. This is our collective responsibility.

Next year, 2015, will be a decisive one. It is impossible to deliver sustainable development without addressing climate change. Ignoring the impacts of climate change in the global plans for the Sustainable Development Goals will lead to ineffective action.

In order to generate more political will at the highest levels in 2015 on both the Sustainable Development Goals and a new climate agreement, my Foundation, together with the World Resources Institute, has promoted a Declaration on Climate Justice (available at [www.mrfcj.org](http://www.mrfcj.org)) which outlines how this transformational action can be achieved. The two-page document, points to 'priority pathways' to climate justice: giving voice, finding a new way for economies to grow, investing in the future, harnessing commitment and accountability, and enforcing the rule of law. In terms of the latter, the declaration envisions a climate just world as one in which all citizens are treated equally under their nation's laws.

Supported by 20 other leaders from the spheres of politics, academia, business, trade unions and civil society, the declaration is one initiative which defines how the rule of law can contribute to a fairer and more effective response to climate change, while working towards safeguarding the rights of every human being, male or female. It concludes with a line, taken from Dr Martin Luther King's famous speech at the March on Washington more than 50 years ago: "The fierce urgency of now". In dealing with the crisis of climate change, the global urgency has never been greater. The 'business as usual' approach where leading nations wait for their peers to cautiously take the first step has to end. The fierce urgency of now compels us to act.

While attending the Nutrition for Growth summit in the UK last June, I was encouraged by the ringing words of President of Malawi Joyce Banda when she said: "African women want climate justice." Those on the frontlines of climate change understand the problem they face and realise the need for fairness, urgency and ambition in designing an effective international response.

In recent times there have been hints that the tide is finally turning, and that the importance of the climate justice approach to global development and closing the gender gap is being realised by global decision makers. When UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon gave his opening remarks to last year's General Assembly, he described how climate change "threatens all development gains," adding that "The poorest and most vulnerable, who are the first to suffer and pay the highest price, are crying out for climate justice."

With the UN designating the theme 'Equality for Women is Progress for All' for this year's International Women's Day, I hope I have shown you the importance of climate justice in achieving this equality and sustaining it for future generations. It is vital that at the UN Climate Summit in September, the interlinked issues of gender equality, agriculture, the rule of law, sustainable development and climate justice are addressed in order to achieve an effective framework for the future of our planet.

2014 is a year of action as we set our sights on the International agreements we need to reach in 2015. I want to challenge each of the international agencies based here in Rome, and each of you in the roles you play within them, to use climate justice to inform the work you are doing to advance the 2015 processes. By actively linking human rights, development, climate change and gender equality in your work you will empower yourselves and your organisations to break out of the 'boxes' that constrain policy making and implementation, and engage in a new model of truly sustainable development.

This could also help to create bridges between you in your different organisations so that the impact of your work is even greater. And with women at the centre of all this work, we will be steaming ahead with the full potential of the world's resources to achieve our common goals.

Thank you.