



Wolfson Lecture Series on Global Education

Address by Mary Robinson - Education for Climate Justice

Thursday, May 19th 2016, 18:00

It is a pleasure to come to Wolfson College in Oxford and speak about Education for Climate Justice. Wolfson College is known for taking a unique approach to education – a dynamic, egalitarian and holistic approach that provides the educational grounding required to tackle the complex and multifaceted challenges of our time.

I believe that the greatest and most complex challenge we face is the threat of climate change. Perhaps more than any other problem humanity has faced, climate change confronts us with the reality of our interdependence. Just as no country alone has the ability to protect their citizens from the impacts of climate change – there is no single discipline from which the solutions to the climate crisis will emerge.

Stabilising the climate, and charting a course for a safer world with opportunity for all, will require innovation - not just in science and technology - but also in our lifestyles, our legal systems, our business practices, the way we farm, the way we run our cities, the way we communicate... the list goes on.

To achieve climate justice, we need good people with the means to do good things. You see, averting climate change is not simply a matter of ending our addiction to fossil fuels – it requires a radical and just transition of our societies. This green revolution will be driven by those young minds that can grapple with the complexity of the challenges we face and devise solutions that are born out of a sense of empathy and fairness as much as they are by technical skills and knowhow. If we do not base our solutions in empathy, then we are likely to fail in our efforts to hand on a safe world to future generations.

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I am sure there are people in this room today who were born after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which gave rise to the United Nation's Framework Convention on Climate Change. I'm sure that, for much of your lives, you have understood the great threats that the emission of greenhouse gases poses to humanity. I also trust that you are under no illusions as to the magnitude of the transition required to the way we live in our global society to eliminate emissions and stabilise our climate. It must be difficult to understand how we, the older generations, have allowed such a reality to come to pass. But when I was a law student in Trinity College Dublin, we were, for the most part, oblivious of the toll that human activity was taking on our environment.

That is not to say that no-one was thinking of the risks posed by rapid industrialisation. In fact, as far back as 1896, the Swedish Nobel Prize winning scientist, Svante Arrhenius, was endeavouring to calculate how changes in the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could alter global surface temperatures¹. Yet it was another 102 years before world leaders would make their first attempt to tackle global warming and the consequent and inevitable shifts in global climate. In 1998, the Kyoto Protocol was agreed – but for the most part it was business as usual. Carbon emissions continued to rise, and the world edged closer towards the brink of catastrophic climate change.

When the gavel came down on the Paris Agreement on climate change at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, last December, I had the privilege of a front row seat. I couldn't help but be moved by the significance of the occasion – after years of tedious and at times fractured negotiations; here we had 195 countries agreeing to a framework that gives the world a fighting chance of turning the tide on climate change. At the time, I released a statement calling it an agreement for humanity. Since December, we have heard many commentators – scientists, activists and others – call into question the robustness of the agreement, and with good cause. But for me, the Paris Agreement nonetheless represents a significant milestone in human history, and an evolution of the international climate regime.

¹ Arrhenius, S (1896) *On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground*. Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science. Series 5, Volume 41, p 237-276.

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For the first time, we have an agreement that pays attention to those people most vulnerable to climate change – an agreement that builds on our growing understanding of climate change as a social – as well as an economic and environmental issue.

I am not a climate scientist – but I have endeavoured to spend my life in the service of those marginalised or made vulnerable by discrimination because of gender, race or poverty. I take as my guide Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which begins “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. That Declaration is the moral compass that guides the normative framework of the United Nations - the reference point for the protection of the dignity of all human beings. However, the Declaration, signed in 1948, and the two International Covenants, adopted in 1966, do not include any reference to a right to a healthy environment.

When I had the honour to serve as High Commissioner for Human Rights, from 1997 to 2002, climate change was not at the front of my mind. It was through my later work on human rights in Africa that I came to understand that any advances in development were threatened by the impacts of climate change.

I would meet women from agricultural communities in Rwanda, Liberia or Malawi and hear the same tales – the seasons are changing, the rains don't come as they used to. Communities no longer knew when to plant and when to harvest. These shifting seasons were having disastrous impacts on their food security and resilience. I recall Constance Okollet, a farmer from Uganda, telling me how she relied on the sale of a surplus from their small agricultural yield to pay essentials for her family - education, fuel, healthcare, clothes. Now, the changing climate threatened her family's basic subsistence. In listening, a great injustice became clear to me – the impacts of climate change are felt first, and hardest, by those communities with the least responsibility for the crisis and with the least capacity to respond or adapt.

I came to climate justice because, for me, it embodies both parts of a moral argument to act on climate change: being on the side of those who are suffering most, while also ensuring that they don't suffer further as the world takes action on climate change. To help ensure this, the world needs an empathetic groundswell of experts equipped, not only with the

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knowledge to devise solutions to the climate crisis, but also the vision to see that all people must be included in, and empowered by, global climate action.

We know that our current way of life is flawed and unsustainable. Science tells us that we cannot go on burning fossil fuels to power our societies – in fact, we know that we must leave most of known fossil fuel reserves in the ground if we are to avoid raising global temperatures to 2oC above pre-industrial levels or beyond². We can see that the industrial revolution, the transition that ushered in the prosperity in which we in developed countries now live, left billions of people behind. I'm sure you are familiar with Oxfam's statistic that the 62 richest people in the world own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world's population³ - global inequality is rapidly worsening. Business as usual, the fossil-fuel based development paradigm, is driving the world towards large scale, catastrophic climate change and increasing inequality.

From the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we know that we must eliminate carbon emissions completely by 2050 in order to maximise our chances of staying well below 2oC and as close to 1.5oC as possible.

But today there are still at least 1.2 billion people around the world -that's one thousand two hundred million people -without any access to electricity whatsoever⁴. The overriding priority for developing countries is development. And development requires energy. If affordable, sustainable alternatives are not made available, developing countries will turn to fossil fuels as the only option available to them – and who could blame them? They want to lift their people out of poverty, improve public services and power their economies - just as the developed world has done.

However this would rapidly deplete what's left of the global carbon budget and render all efforts at climate mitigation futile. We would be on course to a world marked by catastrophic climate change and unimaginable human suffering.

² McGlade, C. & Ekins, P. (2015), The geographical distribution of fossil fuels unused when limiting global warming to 2 °C. Nature 517, p 187-190

³ Oxfam (2016) An Economy for the 1% Available here: <http://bit.ly/1n6OfHv>

⁴ International Energy Agency (2016), Energy Poverty. Available at: www.iea.org/topics/energypoverty

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We must recognise that choices being made today by decision makers in developing countries will have implications for decades to come. For example, a decision to build a coal fired power plant is a 30 to 40 year commitment. We only need to look around Europe to see how difficult it is to wean a nation off its addiction to coal. Here in the UK, the eight coal fired power plants still in operation are all over 30 years old. Coal still accounts for about 17 percent of all European emissions⁵.

Developed countries cannot simply insist that poorer countries refrain from using fossil fuels on account of climate change. Instead they must provide feasible alternatives. In the spirit of global solidarity and self-interest all countries need to work together to enable an inclusive transition to a zero carbon and zero poverty future.

To reach this future, all countries must show leadership today – but this leadership differs depending on a country's circumstance. Obviously, developed countries must rapidly peak and reduce their carbon emissions. However they must also make good on their commitments to support action in developing countries – because it is only this support that will enable decision makers in developing countries to avoid locking their nations into fossil fuel development pathways. What is being asked of developing countries is the greater challenge – they must lead the world in pioneering untested sustainable development pathways.

This is where you come in. These new development pathways require that we fundamentally redesign how our societies function, whether that is in a small local community or an international agency. For this, we need innovators who understand their role as global citizens.

The education from which the students at Wolfson College are benefitting is a privilege afforded to a few. With this privilege comes a responsibility to find ways to apply your learning for the betterment of humanity.

⁵ Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, European Coal Map. Available at: www.coalmap.eu

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Perhaps some of you are sitting here thinking, “This is all well and good, but my research has nothing to do with climate change...”. That could be true - but you may be surprised to discover that your expertise can contribute to the realisation of climate justice.

My Foundation is guided by core principles - one of which highlights the transformative power of education for climate stewardship. When delivered in an effective multi-disciplinary manner, education can increase consciousness of climate change and produce new insights not only at the scientific but also at the sociological and political level. I feel the research cluster model employed here at Wolfson College is perfectly aligned with this principle – the clusters epitomize the multi-disciplinary approach envisaged by climate justice. It only takes a little bit of creative thinking to understand how the skills developed in this setting can be applied to promote climate justice.

For instance – if you are part of the Ancient World Research Cluster or the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, you could consider how you can assist those cultures whose very existence is threatened by climate change. I often think that when Eleanor Roosevelt was drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights she could never have imagined that human-induced climate change might force whole countries to go out of existence. But that is the reality we face today. Over the course of 2015 I worked closely with President Anote Tong of Kiribati and leaders of other Small Island Developing States – for them and for their people, the Paris Agreement is more than some abstract treaty, it is a matter of survival.

President Tong has spoken to me about the fear that grips his people as successive high tides wash away sea defences and threaten homes and services. As a precaution, he has purchased land on Fiji and put in place a relocation strategy which, if required, will allow his people to “migrate with dignity”. If the people of Kiribati do have to move, what becomes of the identity, sovereignty and heritage of a small island people? All people have the right to freely participate in the cultural life of their community – what becomes of this right if a culture is lost?

It will be necessary to document and preserve the history and culture of those most at threat of displacement – so that if they do have to move, they can bring their way of life

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with them. It will be historians and biographers who will be best placed to assist in this essential task.

Similarly, the Wolfson cluster exploring law, justice and society is uniquely positioned to inform the evolution of legal systems required to enable a global response to climate change.

The Paris Agreement is a universal and legally binding international agreement. Importantly it is not a narrow environmental agreement – it is an agreement about sustainable development, economics, energy transformation, human dignity and the planet we pass on to future generations. While the national commitments made on a voluntary basis in the lead up to the Paris Conference are not legally binding, the requirement to review and revise these upwards is, as are the provisions around transparency and accountability. What Paris has created is a legally binding pathway for climate action – the open question is whether this pathway will deliver action at the speed and scale needed to keep warming to not just well below 2oC but targeting 1.5 oC.

This is where the rules that will govern the implementation of the Paris Agreement are important. This will be the focus of work in the coming years under the UNFCCC. The rules on transparency are crucial, so that a regime is created that enables oversight by governments, civil society and citizens.

The rules will need to be strong to bolster what is a non-punitive compliance mechanism under the Agreement. Overall the Paris Agreement adds to the body of law that governs action on climate change – but it is only part of the puzzle. Other aspects of international law - from human rights law to trade law - are also important, and will have to develop and adapt to be fit for purpose in a climate affected world.

A report by the International Bar Association entitled ‘Achieving Justice and Human Rights in an Era of Climate Disruption’ found that the current system of international law is not well suited to addressing climate justice. This is deeply troubling. The legal system we have now at international and domestic level, is not equipped to deal with the scale of the challenge posed by climate change - the biggest threat to human rights of the 21st Century. The fragmented nature of the relevant legal regimes, and their origins in most cases in a world

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before awareness of climate change, means that reforms are needed to enable them to respond effectively and to deliver climate justice.

But despite these challenges, I am confident the rule of law will play a central role in the global response to climate change. We have to understand that law is constantly evolving. Just as climate change requires unprecedented innovation in the fields of science and technology, so too does it demand innovation from national and international legal instruments.

This evolution will be driven by citizens concerned for the global good and we are already seeing the first rumblings. In June last year, Urgenda and 900 co-plaintiffs succeeded in forcing the Dutch government to adopt more stringent climate policies, marking the first time a court has determined that states have a legal obligation towards their citizens, independent of multilateral obligations, in relation to climate change. The plaintiffs organised by Urgenda had accused the Dutch government of negligence for “knowingly contributing” to a breach of the 2 °C warming target.

Since then, the Dutch case has been followed by successful litigation by young people in courts in the United States in Washington State, Oregon and Massachusetts, and a case similar to the Dutch case is pending in Belgium.

While the Paris Agreement does not have the legal teeth that many had hoped for, it does provide the framework to be built upon by action from concerned citizens, civil society organisations, responsible businesses and national leaders. Research into the role of our legal systems in tackling climate change will be essential to shaping effective climate action.

My last visit to Oxford a month ago was to participate in the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship. In his opening remarks Jeff Skoll told a story of a “heart-to-heart” conversation he had with Elon Musk back in 2001 – shortly after Musk had sold PayPal to Skoll’s company, eBay. Skoll asked Musk what he wanted to do next, and Elon Musk said he wanted to build rockets and colonise Mars! To which Jeff Skoll replied – “OK, well I want to keep people around long enough so that there’ll be people to go on your rockets and colonise Mars!”

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Like Jeff, I believe we need to emphasise that today's generations are and will continue to be at the front line of climate impacts and that they lead the way on climate solutions. Solar and wind energy are becoming competitive with fossil fuels. Innovation on battery retention is making them more reliable. Energy efficiency and the circular economy are reducing waste. We can reach the 1.2 billion without electricity with clean energy in the next decade, and they can pay tiny amounts with Apps on mobile phones. The opportunities for a fairer world are there to be explored.

My grandchildren will live through the next half a degree or more of warming we allow to happen. They will live with the potential consequences – increasing human insecurity, even conflict and displacement. What will they think of us if we fail them?

So we need to find the climate solutions now – from the current generations. These solutions will determine whether or not we can limit warming at 1.5oC or whether we spiral upwards to what we know is a devastated world at 3 or 4oC warming. I would call on you all here to treasure the diversity of your college – developing global solutions will require researchers that are sensitive to the nuances of cultural contexts.

Before I conclude, let me emphasise the importance of multidisciplinary approaches to the implementation of the Paris Agreement. Much of the action required will be delivered through a separate international agenda - the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, signed in New York last September. The agenda is ambitious – it has 17 Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, covering all aspects of our global systems – from the management of our oceans and forests, to how we produce and consume goods.

The success of both the Paris Agreement and the new development agenda are inexorably linked. Without the ambitious and robust climate action required to stabilise warming as far below 2oC as possible, recent and future development gains will be eroded or even rolled back by climate impacts.

Correspondingly, the Sustainable Development Goals must be achieved in a manner consistent with the ultimate objective of the Paris Agreement – the ambitious targets on energy, industrialisation and infrastructure must be met in such a way that they don't lock countries into carbon intensive facilities.

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Climate solutions are sustainable development solutions – and they need to be designed with fairness and poverty reduction in mind. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for an approach that “reaches the furthest behind first”, and the Paris Agreement commits us to prioritising the most vulnerable countries and people. In designing the global response to climate change we have an opportunity to eradicate extreme poverty, ensure access to clean energy for all and achieve equitable access to sustainable development. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.

A development first approach emphasises the need to move away from addressing climate policy and action in isolation, to making it part of an integrated approach to sustainable development.

Despite the universal nature of the SDGs, some developed countries have not fully realised that the SDGs are a domestic as well as an international agenda. The SDGs apply to the UK as much as they apply to Malawi or Myanmar - and to achieve them actions need to be taken in relation to oceans, waste, cities, food production, land use and energy – all key sectors for climate action. The inclusion of a stand-alone goal on climate change was an important success of the SDG negotiations.

While the climate goal, SDG 13, is somewhat vague, it provides an invaluable link between the climate and sustainable development agendas. The goal requires the integration of climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning. This mainstreaming of climate action will be critical to creating an enabling environment for the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement. There is a specific target, 13b, which calls on countries to promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate - change - related planning and management in least developed countries and Small Island Developing States. The target includes focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities.

This provides a window of opportunity for the implementation of climate-just programming in the most vulnerable countries.

It is hard not to be envious of those of you setting out on your careers – you can play a key role in bringing about the just transition. We now live in a world that is almost

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unrecognisable from the one in which I spent my years as a student. There is more prosperity, technology has advanced beyond what was imaginable in my college days and more people are realising their rights. But there is still great, and worsening, inequality. A just transition to a zero carbon, zero poverty future is an enormous challenge, but we must succeed. I believe it is possible - people working together are capable of incredible things and so much can be achieved by a young, dedicated and informed generation.

In 1961 John F Kennedy announced that the United States would put a man on the moon. Only one month earlier Yuri Gagarin had become the first man in space. At the time, the idea of a manned mission to the moon could not have seemed more remote – it was breathtakingly ambitious. And yet, 8 years later, it became a reality when Neil Armstrong took those famous first steps on the surface of the moon. Remarkably the average age of the team at NASA's mission control in Houston that day was 26, which means their average age, when they heard Kennedy's challenge, was 18.

I have reached a stage in life where I increasingly enjoy issuing challenges. I have one for you, as researchers and future professionals, who can help to make sure that the Paris Agreement is a success and delivers justice. I challenge you to get into a 1.5oC frame of mind. Firstly, we must all walk the talk and reduce our own carbon footprint. Secondly, if we are to succeed in stabilising warming at 1.5oC, what will this mean for your area of interest? Whether it is the environment, education, behavioural science, digital communication, cultural studies, law, health or gender equality – or many more besides – what are the implications of, and pathways to, 1.5oC? And how can your sector help to ensure that people remain the focus of all you do – that the rights of all people are respected and protected as the world takes action on climate change? There is no time to waste, the clock is ticking.

Let me end with the word of a good friend, Wangari Maathai, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work on peace and the environment:

“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”

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That time is now.

Thank you

ENDS