



**The Ministerial Policy Review Session of the Second Session of the
United Nations Environment Assembly**

***“Healthy Environment, Healthy People: Delivering on the
environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development”***

Keynote address by Mary Robinson

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I am delighted to return to Nairobi for the second session of the UN Environment Assembly. I welcome the increased focus on the cross cutting issues of environment, health and development. This is an area that I have been interested in for some time, particularly in how these issues intersect with the challenges of climate change and justice.

The threat of climate change is not just one of rising sea levels, increased droughts and extreme weather events- although these are all the issues that will grab the newspaper headlines. It is also an insidious threat, which cuts across virtually every sector of public policy. Climate change is an accelerator of land degradation, has a major impact on human health and limits the capacity of countries to develop. Climate Change also impacts the most vulnerable first and hardest, the very people who have done the least to cause it.

Climate Justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable people and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly.

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The impacts of climate change on the right to health are now well understood. The 2015 Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change documents the direct effects of the environmental impacts of climate change on human health, including increased disease vectors, food and nutrition insecurity and mental illness. The central finding of the Commission is that 'tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st Century'.

When my fellow key note speaker, Dr. Margaret Chan addressed the Human Rights Council's Panel Discussion on Climate Change and the Right to Health earlier this year, she made a grim statement. She said that 'The hard-won gains for health since the start of this century can easily be swept away by the tidal wave of health threats unleashed by climate change.' In this context she identified the Paris Agreement as being not just a treaty about Climate Change but also a health treaty. I would go a step further, the Paris agreement is an environmental treaty, it is a treaty of economics, it is a treaty of human rights and it is a treaty for responsible global governance.

In it the community of nations has already identified one of the most effective actions we can take to ensure that communities do not see their right to health eroded in this century. That is to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C. This target was included in Article 2 of the Paris Agreement and came after a group of countries came together in a coalition of high ambition and pushed for a result that would be fair to the world's most vulnerable populations.

According to the UK Met Office we are already 1 °C above pre-industrial temperatures. With this level of warming we are seeing increases in disease such as cholera and dengue as well as the emergence of threats that have previously been limited such as the Zika virus. It is clear that reducing the further warming of our planet will be key to limiting future health emergencies.

Climate change also effects our attempts to meet the global goals we have set ourselves under Agenda 2030. A recent study conducted by UNDP on Climate Change and Labour has

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identified climate change as establishing hurdles for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty and hunger, health, education, gender and income inequalities, good jobs and growth, and sustainable cities and communities. For this reason the Sustainable Development Goals need to be seen holistically. Work toward the achievement of one goal will assist in the achievement of the others. We can see this when we look at Goal 13 on climate change. Without achievement here we risk comprehensive failure in all other goals, particularly those for zero poverty, zero hunger, and good health and well-being.

Addressing these issues can often be complementary. An elegant example of this can be seen in the distribution of clean cook stoves in Malawi. The traditional cook stoves are inefficient, lead to significant deforestation and contribute to respiratory disease, particularly in women, as they are frequently used in houses with poor ventilation. Through the distribution of clean cook stoves carbon emissions have been reduced. Additionally women need to spend less time collecting firewood, giving them more time to undertake economic activity, and the negative health impacts of smoke in the house have been eliminated. We can see from this example how clever responses to climate change can have a positive impact on development and health.

As the UN SGs Special Envoy on El Nino and Climate, let me stress that the impacts of the actions we take now are felt by real people in communities all over the globe. As such we may not always be in the best position to develop appropriate responses to environmental and health impacts of climate change. The majority of us in this room will not experience climate change as a dangerous threat to our way of life. It is the most vulnerable that will experience the full brunt of this phenomena. And it is they, born out of necessity, who have developed some of the most innovative solutions to deal with it. We need to listen to these people and learn from their experience to build solutions that are good for all, and not divorced from reality.

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I am put in mind of a grassroots women's leader my Foundation brought to the Climate Change session in Bonn. Her name was Rosemary and she told me, and the delegates of the conference, of the growing problem of food security in her region. The accompanying hunger affected the communities including their health due to poor nutrition. Rosemary and the other women of her region organised themselves, providing support and communal funds to address the issue, accessing drought resistant crops. Now the women of her community have more food for their families and more income to send their kids to school along with the related health benefits.

Rosemary lives in Kitui County in Kenya, a few hours' drive from this room. It is people like her who need to be heard if we want to take effective climate action and sustainable development that is both fair and targeted appropriately.

So what do we need to do going forward?

We need greater linkages between the international mechanisms to ensure that climate change is mainstreamed across our efforts. We need to recognise that when dealing with the environmental aspects of climate change, we must also consider the development and health impacts.

We also need to recognise that issues of climate change, health and the environment are not just interlinked laterally but vertically as well. Bringing greater interaction between all levels of policy and decision making will ensure that responses respond to the realities on the ground.

In doing so we must listen to the people on the front lines of climate change. Often they will have the solutions we need. To accomplish this spaces and forums should be created to amplify their voices and stories.

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Finally, and most importantly of all we need to meet our 1.5 °C target. Doing so is a central pillar in ensuring that the worst environmental, health and development effects of climate change are limited. To achieve this the majority of our remaining fossil fuel reserves need to stay in the ground.

This is the challenge we must face going forward and it is one I believe we are capable of meeting. A human rights based approach will ensure that when we do meet this threat we do so with a view to helping the most vulnerable first.

I would like to quote a great woman of Kenya, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai who said:

In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground!

That time is now.