



UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S  
SPECIAL ENVOYS ON

**EL NIÑO &  
CLIMATE**

## REMARKS

UNSG Special Envoy on El Niño & Climate Mrs. Mary Robinson

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Your Majesty, Excellencies, all protocols observed

Ladies and gentlemen,

### INTRODUCTION

I am honoured to join you today as the Special Envoy of United Nations Secretary-General on El Niño and Climate. Ambassador Macharia Kamau of Kenya and I have accepted this task both because of the seriousness of the situation with which we are now faced with the current El Niño, and because of the need for a new, more urgent and more integrated approach meeting the challenges we will face in the future.

Even in my short time in Swaziland I have witnessed the terrible impacts of relentless drought on children, families and communities. I travelled to Dvokodvweni yesterday to meet with El Niño-affected children and families to understand and assess the situation, including the immediate and longer-term actions needed at all levels.

The depth of the drought this year – with El Niño coming on the back of successive seasons of failed rains and above average temperatures – was evident in the parched earth, the sparse vegetation and the obviously weak and under-nourished animals. I met with a group of elderly people including Mrs. Gwebu and Mrs. Thwala, benefitting from a food distribution programme run collaboratively by the Swazi Disaster Management Agency, the World Food Programme and the local NGO, ACAT. These women explained how the drought had killed their livestock and made water completely unavailable in their households. They have seen drought before but they know that this time, something is different. When I asked the group what they feared most in the future, their answer was ‘everything’. The drought has caused them to fear for their families, their livelihoods, the future of their community, the prospects for their children and grandchildren.

But when I spoke to the younger generation, including a youth outreach group and its formidable trio of young leaders Mhlengi, Simo and Minenhle, this fear was countered by an irrepressible sense of hope and optimism. These young people are organizing themselves and acting to improve their lives: distributing dignity

kits to their peers, ensuring that informed choices can be made regarding their sexual health, and protecting themselves from disease and insecurity. Their leadership is inspiring. We must listen to them. Only if we harness their energy, and the energy of the children we heard this morning can we build a future worthy of their optimism.

But I don't need to tell any leader in this region about the seriousness of the drought and the fact that el nino has been aggravated now by climate change. I was very encouraged by the number of references to the seriousness of the drought in the distinguished speeches this morning.

## **SCALE & IMPACT**

El Niño has been aggravated by climate change and has badly affected more than 60 million people worldwide, impacting lives and livelihoods, reversing development gains, threatening people's human security and endangering achievement of the new Sustainable Development Goals.

I have already visited Ethiopia and Honduras in my mandate, and will travel next week to Vietnam. Ambassador Kamau has been to Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste, and plans to come to Southern Africa in October.

Although the El Niño weather event has officially concluded, food insecurity is not expected to peak until well into 2017 – and its painful economic, social and human legacy could ripple through generations if we do not take all necessary measures to prevent further suffering. Nowhere will this suffering be felt more than among the estimated 579,000 children in Southern Africa facing the most severe form of malnutrition - for these children this is literally a matter of life or death.

## **FUNDING GAP**

No wonder then that the funds needed to tackle these breathtaking numbers are also breathtaking. Globally, \$5 billion dollars is being sought to respond to support people affected by El Niño. In Southern Africa alone SADC has put the total funds needed to respond to this unfolding emergency at \$2.4 billion dollars. Unfortunately the gap between humanitarian needs and funds raised is vast. To date, \$1.6 billion dollars has been raised, leaving a global funding gap of \$3.4 billion dollars.

We must take advantage of the upcoming rainy season to ensure that communities have seeds and tools and an opportunity to become more resilient. The next harvest needs to be as successful as possible, but supporting this requires resources, ownership and coordination at all levels.

The collaborative approach that SADC has demonstrated in launching a joint appeal is to be commended. The louder and more coordinated our voices are on this issue, the more impact we will have. With so many lives at stake, Ambassador Macharia Kamau and I are committed to helping to close this gap, and to assist in mobilising the funding so desperately needed in order to scale up the humanitarian response.

## **THE 'NEW NORMAL'**

But we cannot be satisfied with this approach in the future. We cannot respond with humanitarian aid to what is a chronic, predictable and worsening problem. Because of climate change, we must now expect that future

weather events like El Niño and La Niña will be more frequent and severe than ever before. This ‘new normal’ demands a different way of doing things, both in our actions to reduce and reverse the effects of climate change, and in the ways that we prepare for, and respond to, these climate-linked threats. It is important to bear in mind the injustice of climate change impacts, which affect most severely countries and communities that are least responsible for the problem.

In many ways, the 2015/2016 El Niño was a window into a climate future that is less predictable and more extreme. Although the countries of Southern Africa are well versed in dealing with drought and other challenges, this El Niño has stretched even the most resilient countries, eroding reserves and threatening to undo hard-won development gains.

So we must ask ourselves at this juncture, how can we do better? We have no time to waste; it is likely that the next climate-linked humanitarian disaster will be upon us even before communities have recovered from this one. El Niño’s equally troublesome sibling La Niña may be just on the horizon, further affecting the same communities already struggling with the effects of El Niño.

### **‘TODAY’ AND ‘TOMORROW’ MUST BE TACKLED IN PARALLEL**

Although it may be difficult to acknowledge, we also need to recognise that when communities require humanitarian assistance for predictable weather events like El Niño it means our resilience and preparedness efforts have not succeeded.

In order to avoid becoming trapped in an inescapable cycle of shock and partial recovery, the challenges of today and tomorrow must be tackled in parallel, at all levels – from communities, local and national governments to regional and global institutions.

Communities are telling us that El Niño, La Niña and other climate-related events should not just be about humanitarian response. The focus should also be on risk-informed development that prioritises prevention, mitigation and preparedness. All the evidence tells that this type of early action works – and that it provides exponential returns in terms of human dignity, safety and wellbeing, as well as countries’ overall economic and social development.

We know that every dollar invested in preparedness saves seven dollars in response. And a multitude of studies have clearly demonstrated that early response and resilience-building interventions are significantly more cost-effective than emergency interventions. One African study estimated that response at four months after a failed harvest costs \$49 per household, whereas response at six months after a failed harvest costs \$1,294 per household<sup>1</sup>. We simply cannot afford to ignore the economic case for action.

As a global community we are reasonably successful at ‘early warning’, raising the alarm about the slowly-unfolding disaster we can clearly see coming our way. The challenge then is in moving from early warning to early action. Early interventions to mitigate the impact of impending shocks do require significant funding but can be designed in such a way as to be ‘no or low-regrets’, delivering returns even if the forecast crisis does not materialise at the level expected.

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<sup>1</sup> Clarke D and Vargas Hill R (2013). ‘Analysis of the African Risk Capacity Facility’ IFPRI discussion paper. <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/127813>

We are seeing in this El Niño response that the decision of several countries to invest in climate resilience and early action has paid very real dividends, including avoiding the need for external humanitarian assistance altogether. We are also seeing incredible stories of community-led resilience in the face of this threat, with households recognising risks early on and preparing as best they can. We must learn from these positive examples. An investment in resilience and early action is an investment in the future.

The single most important ingredient for success in this endeavour is the political leadership that can only be provided by you, heads of state and government. Integrated national resilience and response plans that bring together all actors must be owned and driven by the highest levels of government. Without your commitment to responding to this challenge at the necessary scale and your own financial investments in resilient systems for food, water and social protection, no amount of international assistance will succeed in breaking the cycle of drought and under-development. Ideally the blueprint for action should start in March 2017, when we hope the current humanitarian crisis will have diminished.

## **ADAPTATION = SURVIVAL**

To conclude, Excellencies, this El Niño serves as a stark reminder that our development and humanitarian systems need to be deeply integrated, climate-proofed and fit for purpose.

The case for action is clear, and this action needs to come from all levels, working together in close partnership. Household, community, government and regional-level leadership has never been more important – these types of complex and interconnected threats mean that change must come from within.

At the global level, the Secretary-General has tasked myself and Ambassador Kamau with developing a blueprint for action that will help us all to adapt to this ‘new normal’ and reduce the threats facing our most vulnerable communities. Any such blueprint must draw on an integrated human security approach, aiming to build upon and focus efforts to ‘climate proof’ global development, so that predictable weather events like El Niño even aggravated by climate change are no longer a disaster. It must also help us to respond to climate-linked emergencies more quickly and effectively when they do happen, saving lives and reducing suffering.

It is important to note that this blueprint for future action must build upon what exists and what works. What we need is a collective effort not to reinvent, but to bring greater focus and urgency to the important commitments to climate resilience and disaster risk reduction agreed upon in the SDGs and the Sendai Framework. This must include finding ways to ensure that global commitments to financing for climate resilience are translated into rapid and serious investments in the places that need it most. The blueprint aim is to bring together these building blocks, engaging the right actors and using all tools at our disposal to create a practical pathway towards a more resilient future.

I have invited SADC to co-sponsor an event at the forthcoming General Assembly in New York to both advocate for a far more robust international response to the crisis, and to consider elements what such a blueprint might contain. It is critical that not only affected Member States but also donors, international financial institutions, civil society, and our critical private sector partners engage in this process.

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Climate aggravated weather patterns such as El Niño need not be disasters. Your support to lead the shift to risk-informed development and coordinated early action will be crucial. It is clear that this is a complex challenge that demands integrated responses built on forward-looking partnerships. It is equally clear that a failure to deliver on this mission will have ripples felt for generations, letting down our most vulnerable communities and undermining the foundation principle of the Sustainable Development Goals – that no one will be left behind. Only your leadership can ensure that this promise is delivered to those who need it most.

Thank you.