Check Against Delivery

Seeing future weather through the lens of climate justice

Mary Robinson Keynote Address

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Happy 80th Anniversary!

It's a pleasure to be with you here today to speak about the important role meteorologists have to play in realising climate justice. Indeed, since its founding, MET Eireann has played a uniquely formative role in Irish society. From a very young age, I was aware of the weather forecast and its importance in community life. The forecast shapes our island home, it determines when the farmers plant and harvest, it keeps the men and women on the seas around our coast safe and helps communities plan how and when to come together.

Our weather shapes our national identity and its echoes can be found in our art, mythology and music. Brendan McWilliams understood this intimately, and he often used his column in the Irish Times, Weather Eye, to reflect poignantly on how our climate is interwoven into the fabric of our culture. He also foresaw, as many of you did, the spectre of human induced climate change long before it was a focus of public discourse.

In the first February of the millennium, Brendan wrote a column for the Times about the coming of spring. True to his unique talent in science communication, this article drew on lore surrounding St Bridget's Day, quoted Oliver Goldsmith and taught readers of the Foehn effect before delivering a stark warning. In his closing paragraph he said of the arrival of spring…

> *"Since 1940 there has been a dramatic shift: the seasons have started to arrive earlier, rather than later, and at an accelerating rate, as is also detected by the satellites. And this, of course, is entirely consistent with current greenhouse theories about global warming"*

In 2000, when this article was published, I was working as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Climate change was not on my list of priorities. It wasn't until several years later, when I was working on human rights in Africa, that I came to understand the threat posed by 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. Just as in Ireland, these communities have a special connection to the weather,

particularly those depending on the land for their survival. But across Africa, communities no longer knew when to plant or 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.

Shortly after these experiences I set up my Foundation focused on Climate Justice. Climate justice lies at the nexus of climate change and human rights and seeks to focus on what impacts climate change has on the most marginalised and disenfranchised in our global community.

The lens of climate justice brings what can be an abstract or abstruse phenomenon into sharp and immediate focus and illuminates the real human face of suffering and devastation brought about by climate change. 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.

The existential threat of climate change confronts us with our global interdependence. In order to avoid the worst impacts of climate change and achieve the ultimate goal of the Paris Agreement – *to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above preindustrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels* – the global community must act in solidarity, motivated by an enlightened self-interest.

The global transformation required to realise climate justice and protect those most vulnerable in the face of climate impacts will require everyone. Meteorologists will be involved in numerous facets of the fight for climate justice but today I would like to touch on three.

The first is utilising your expertise to help those living on the front lines of climate change. Your expertise in understanding, not just how our climate system is evolving, but also in assisting with developing community resilience in the face of climate impacts, will help to save the lives and livelihoods of those worst affected.

For instance, as you will be all too well aware, drought is among the most damaging, and least understood, of all natural hazards. Droughts have become more intense and frequent in recent years because of climate change.

The onset of a particularly severe El Niño in 2016, coupled with weakened resilience of communities facing climate impacts, resulted in increased food insecurity for some 60 million people across Africa, Asia and Latin America. Early warning systems can help to build resilience before the onset of drought and can ensure that communities remain intact and mitigate the worst impacts.

An early warning system is much more than a forecast – it is a linked risk information and communication system that actively engages communities involved in preparedness. Obviously in Ireland the problem will be increased flooding in the coming years.

Meteorologists, in conjunction with government actors and development practitioners, will need to learn how to work with communities in a variety of cultural and social contexts and involve them in conducting risk assessments, dissemination of information and designing responses. Adopting an inclusive and participatory approach to the design of early warning systems will make them more appropriate, effective and robust.

This brings me to my second point. In some of the poorest and most climate vulnerable countries, weather data is often unreliable or completely lacking. As a result, many do not have the capacity to provide risk information to their own citizens and are unable to manage disaster risk effectively. This inhibits the ability for countries to develop early warning systems and other response measures. MET Eireann, and other MET offices across Europe, can play an important role in building the capacity of their counterparts in developing countries and help to modernise weather services and data collection.

In conjunction with this push to build the capacity of meteorological services in developing countries, efforts must be made to ensure that local and traditional knowledge is preserved, archived and strengthened to support the fight against climate change. We must learn from the experiences of those who understand the day-to-day reality of climate disruption. Local and indigenous women's voices especially are absent from decision making on climate change. In many parts of the world, women are responsible for the majority of the labour involved in growing crops and processing food after the harvest. This expertise ensures communities have the food they need to survive and must inform how we act in the face of climate change. Their collectively held knowledge is critical to successful, community-based climate action, and we must find ways to blend local and traditional knowledge with the qualitative and quantitative work of the scientific community.

The final point I'd like to make concerns language. While I appreciate that the concepts which underpin weather forecasting and climate change analysis are inherently complex, I know that we must get better at communicating the realities of climate change to the public. People cannot engage with scientific knowledge if the concepts being put forward seem impenetrable. I believe this is something that Brendan McWilliams understood well.

The technical jargon of the climate change community – a world of mitigation, adaptation, market mechanisms and nationally determined contributions – is meaningless to most people and only serves to further alienate. The onus is not on communities around the world to learn this obscure tongue. Instead we must develop new, inclusive ways of discussing climate change, rooted in our cultures and our shared identities. It must speak to the gravity of the situation we find ourselves in and inspire the determination to change course.

Before I conclude, a reminder. Climate change is not some future phenomenon we are seeking to stave off. In Ireland we are fortunate – while the treat of climate change is real and increasing, it is not yet the imminent and existential threat it is in some parts of the world. For communities living in low lying pacific island atolls like Kiribati or the Marshall Islands, the ebb and flow of the tides can leave them homeless - people like Ursula Rakova, a courageous woman from a small atoll called the Carteret Islands near Papua New Guinea. Faced with rising sea levels and the threat of increasingly devastating storm surges from more frequent tropical storms, Ursula has been organising her people and assisting them in moving from their island atoll home to mainland Papua New Guinea, where they will be safer. But this means leaving their ancestral home behind and taking on the challenge of integrating into a new community and a new way of life.

There are challenging years ahead for the global community, but if we are to deliver a safe and prosperous world for our children and grandchildren then we are all called to join in the struggle for climate justice. For this, we need you to inspire people, in Ireland and around the world, to take action. Oscar Wilde once said that “Conversation about the weather is the last refuge of the unimaginative” – in the current climate, I couldn’t disagree with him more.

And now, I’ll say goodnight to you all! (Wink!)

[ENDS]