



Mary Robison Keynote Address
World Community Development Conference
National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Co. Kildare,

10.00 -11.15 Monday June 25th, 2018

Thank you very much Anastasia¹ for the warm welcome. Thank you also to the co-organisers of the Conference, Community Work Ireland, the International Association for Community Development and the Department of Applied Social Studies here at Maynooth University, for the invitation to speak here today. Before I continue let me congratulate the International Association for Community Development on your 65th anniversary, I wish you well for the next 65 years and continue with the good work.

I am very happy to be here among so many community development practitioners today and to see so many countries and communities represented here at the conference. Looking at the experience in the room today and the many topics you will discuss over the course of the week I am sure an extraordinary amount of listening to and learning from each other will take place. When I looked at the conference themes you will discuss this week they all resonated with me - I think this is because community development and climate justice are so closely aligned. I can see several of the Principles of Climate Justice adopted by my Foundation across the conference themes. I can see Principles such as Respect and Protect Human Rights, Support the Right to Development, Ensure that Decisions on Climate Change are Participatory, Transparent and Accountable, and of course Highlight Gender Equality and Equity.

I came to climate change not as a scientist or an environmental lawyer, and I wasn't really impressed by the images of polar bears or melting glaciers. It was because of the impact on people, and the impact on their rights -- their rights to food and safe water, health, education

¹ Anastasia Crickley, WCDC2018 Chairperson

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and shelter. And I say this with humility, because I came late to the issue of climate change. When I served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002, climate change wasn't at the front of my mind. I don't remember making a single speech on climate change. I knew that there was another part of the United Nations - the UN Convention on Climate Change - that was dealing with the issue of climate change. It was later when I started to work in African countries on issues of development and human rights. And I kept hearing this pervasive sentence: "Oh, but things are so much worse now, things are so much worse." And then I explored what was behind that; it was about changes in the climate - climate shocks, changes in the weather.

I was in Malawi two weeks ago and I had the pleasure of visiting the community and seeing projects supported by Irish Aid in partnership with Trócaire, United Purpose and the Catholic Development Commission in Malawi. There I met community members who again reminded me of the injustice of climate change. I visited the village of Kanyera in Dedza District where I met Lucracia Fimlimoni, a mother of 7, who explained to me that changing weather patterns associated with climate change mean that in recent years she has struggled to grow enough food to feed her family, earn enough money to send her children to school and meet her families basic needs. Lucracia lives in a village that has no access to electricity, she does not have a car – in fact she has none of the benefits that many of us here in this room have as a result of fossil fuels. Lucracia and her community are those who are the most impacted though least responsible for the impacts of climate change.

This is the injustice of climate change those who are most vulnerable in society, no matter the level of development of the country in question, will suffer most. This means that people who are marginalised or poor, women, indigenous communities, slum dwellers and migrants will be disproportionately affected by climate impacts. This is a terrible injustice and why I continue to fight for climate justice.

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 impacts equitably and fairly. 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, and that they share the benefits of a world powered by

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renewable energy. Climate justice transforms climate change from a discourse on greenhouse gases and melting icecaps into a civil rights movement with the people and communities most vulnerable to climate impacts at its heart.

As you will be aware the, 2030 Agenda envisages a “world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity”.

This is the world we can create; building on what we have achieved to date and being determined to forge a bright future for generations to come. Justice, dignity and the rule of law are foundational values that can shape a resilient world – able to withstand shocks and outbreaks of violence. Able to protect citizens and to uphold rights. Agenda 2030 draws the links between climate change and sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals are universal and apply to all countries. However we cannot have peaceful and prosperous societies without taking urgent action on climate change.

I was happy to see the theme of the conference is “Participation, Power and Progress: Community development towards 2030 – Our analysis, Our actions”, the right to participation is one of the principles of Climate Justice my Foundation has been working on for the last 8 years. It is something I and my colleagues feel strongly about. However I don’t think I am alone in that view in the room here today – when I think of community development work and those of you involved in it I think of words like inclusion, participation and person centred. It seems obvious to us here in this room that ensuring the meaningful participation of people in decision making process that impact their lives, that there is gender balance and that women have a voice in these processes, will lead to more robust and more impactful decisions – on any topic. But it is not, it seems, obvious to everyone, and we constantly need to remind others that there is a value in diversity and a value in listening to and including local voices and traditional knowledge.

I recall learning an important lesson which has stayed with me. In 2013 my Foundation joined with the Irish Government in organising a conference in Dublin on Hunger-Nutrition Climate Justice. Ireland had the Presidency of the EU at that time, so there were Ministers from other EU countries and the EU Commission as well as experts such as Al Gore. But the

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real value of this conference was that of the 300 participants, 100 were from grassroots and indigenous communities worldwide, and most of the discussion was in learning circles where all participants felt equal. I recall Etrida Luhanga a community member from Malawi saying, “you have to listen to me because I have experience – what I know isn’t written in your papers”. And I have benefited greatly since then by listening to frontline experts on climate change such as Etrida.

I saw the value of this type of participation in action in Malawi again recently. With the support of Irish Aid and partners Lucracia and her community have undertaken a number of interventions to address the development needs in light of climate impacts, this included building irrigations systems, improving watershed management and making changes to their crop production techniques to increase their resilience. The hard work is paying off and as a community they are coping better with the uncertainties in the weather and the growing season, as well as more extreme weather events. What was central to this success was the communities’ ownership of the interventions. I had the pleasure of having a women’s only lunch with 12 women from the community and from the discussions it was obvious to me the success of the projects in the community was in no small part to the community ownership of the activities and the manner in which they had been designed taking on board the communities experience and knowledge.

In her acceptance speech for the Sydney Peace Prize, author and activist, Arundhati Roy, said something that resonates with me;

“we know, of course, there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

To many this is a confronting statement. But it is true nonetheless.

We who are in positions of decision making power, or who engage in processes that will ultimately affect the lives, and decide the fate, of whole swathes of the planet’s people cannot do so in isolation. We have a moral imperative to ensure that there is no one ‘preferably unheard’. I would argue this needs to be at all levels – not just in the community where we are much better at doing so but at all levels of decision making – from local to national and to international levels. It is easy to argue that at the international level negotiating highly

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technical aspects of international climate or development policy, to feel that there is no place for local voices, for indigenous voices, for women's voices. But even as I say this we can hear the lie in it. This is a place which needs more, not less input from the people experiencing climate change first hand and finding solutions on a daily basis. The commitments Parties have made through Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement to deliver increasingly ambitious climate action has only raised the importance of procedural rights in the context of climate decision-making. Given the range of processes under Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement and the diffuse set of actors now involved, it is evident that limited, ad hoc, public engagement or sporadic consultations are not fit for purpose. This is particularly true in the climate sphere where a robust commitment to public participation in decision making is urgently needed at all levels in order to ensure human rights protections are integrated into climate processes and interventions and so that states are held to account for progress on their Paris commitments.

Let me focus for a minute on women's participation. A 2015 study by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human rights finds that 'women continue to face significant discrimination in relation to their participation in public and political life in all geographical regions'. The reasons for this are multifaceted and complex and include economic, social and cultural issues, structural and social barriers and deeply entrenched gender roles and stereotypes. Improving women's participation has been something my Foundation has been working on for a number of years now and while progress has been made in, gender equality in the climate regime has lagged behind other areas.

A good friend of mine Agnes Leina, who is an advocate for human rights and gender equality, is a pastoralist from Samburu County Northern Kenya, told me of what can go wrong when local and indigenous communities are not consulted in the design and implementation of climate solutions when we were together at COP23 last November.

Her community was not consulted before the construction of the Lake Turkana wind farm, made up of over 365 wind turbines covering approx. 40,000 hectares. In fact, the pastoralist communities in the locality will not benefit from access to the renewable energy that the project will generate. As a result of the lack of transparency, communication and participation, there have been protests by local communities and an injunction was issued over the construction of the last six turbines. Using tools like Environmental Impact

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Assessments, and legal protections such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent, and procedural rights, Agnes' community is demanding their rights. They are not against wind energy or development – but they do want their rights to be respected and their knowledge to inform decision making.

Agnes personifies the value of empowering women to be leaders in their community and the powerful impact women like her can have when they engage in climate decision making at national and international level. Armed with her story and empowered through access to education, access to information, and access to resources she was able to speak truth to power at the international level and demand respect for the rights of her community and communities like hers. As she has often repeated, “there should be no decision about us, without us”.

Increasing women's participation in the design, planning and implementation of climate actions can lead to improved environmental and development outcomes for the everyone – women's leadership and inclusion at all levels has led to improved outcomes of climate related projects and policies. The benefits of this participation are not just for women, the whole community benefits – it is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do. Women's meaningful participation is essential for climate justice.

However we must ensure women's meaningful participation, at all levels. Too often we can allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of success when we count numbers alone. Gender parity is important but the barriers do not disappear once women reach the decision making table. This can be particularly true at grassroots level where women's participation can be tokenistic or where they are allocated gender stereotypical roles as organisers. To address this requires us to examine and understand the barriers to women's participation. These reasons are complex and multi-faceted. However we know that taking the time to understand the context in relation to women's ability to participate has real pay offs and can lead to meaningful change in women's empowerment. Targeted capacity building is central to women's empowerment. In order to fully support women's participation in decision-making processes, the necessary resources, knowledge, training and supportive environment should be provided. This is especially important at local level and also something that has been mentioned continuously in discussions I have been involved in over the last number of

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years. But I am hopeful I am seeing progress and we are seeing more of a focus on meaningful participation of men and women in development and climate processes.

I hear you have an interesting evening of songs of peace, struggle, protest and freedom planned for later today and I am sorry that I cannot join you, I do love a good sing – song. I wanted to fishing by sharing some words from one of my favourite songs of struggle because it sums up the hope that I, and all of us gathered here today, have for a better future and the reason we continue with the work that we do.

When I was UN High Commissioner for Human Rights I went on a visit to India and while there I had the opportunity to visit some projects in the slum area of Delhi. These projects were similar to many of the activities you as community development experts are engaged in. While there I was asked by the NGO would I mind if the children of the community sang a song for me, of course I was delighted. As I stepped outside in a narrow laneway 80 children immaculately dressed in white stood and sang in Hindi ‘We Shall Overcome’. I can still hear it clearly and it gives me hope for the work we are all so committed to, let me finishing by reminding you of those words, I’ll save you the pleasure of singing them!

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, some day.

Thank you.