

Mary Robinson Keynote Speech
Climate Justice: Putting People First
One Young World, The Hague
20th October 2018

It is a pleasure to be back at One Young World. It is a particular joy to me for participate in this summit and soak in the energy and optimism of young leaders. For me, this is quite a special One Young World because it was here, in The Hague, quite a few years ago, that I had my professional job as a young woman. I was still a law student when I was retained by the Conference on Private International Law to compile the minutes in English of several sessions of the conference held at the Peace Palace.

Many of you are part of a generation for whom awareness of climate change has been a constant throughout your lives. You have understood the great threat that the emission of greenhouse gases poses to humanity. I trust that you also understand that now we require a rapid transition of our global systems to a clean energy future. I imagine it is difficult to understand how we, the older generations, have allowed this reality to come to pass. But when I was working here in 1967 we were, for the most part, oblivious to the impact that human activity was having on our environment.

You will have all seen the coverage last week following the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Special Report on 1.5°C of Global Warming. The central message in this report – compiled by hundreds of leading scientists - was a stark warning. Our time to address climate change and avoid the most catastrophic consequences for your generation and generations yet to be born has all but run out. I feel a great frustration at the lack of urgency of my generation to address this most existential of threats. I even have sleepless nights when I consider the state of the world my grandchildren may grow old in – but I still have hope. That hope is that yours will be the generation that fights for, and secures, climate justice for all.

Some of you here today may not be familiar with climate justice. It is a transformative concept – compelling a shift 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. 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.

Climate justice is informed by science, responds to science and acknowledges the need for equitable stewardship of the world's resources.

The injustice of climate change is that the impacts are felt first and hardest by those with the least responsibility for the causes of the climate crisis. People on the front lines of climate change are often those that have benefited least from the fossil fuel development. This limits their capacity to withstand or adapt to severe storms, droughts or floods. In addition, these same communities have the least ability to engage with the decisions that will shape their futures due to poverty, discrimination or a lack of opportunity to build their capacity to advocate for themselves. Part of climate justice is that the one billion people who still live without access to modern energy must now benefit as the world transitions to a cleaner future. We will not achieve climate justice without ensuring that all people benefit from renewable energy and clean cook stoves. We must reach those furthest behind first.

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”. It is important to note, however, that the Declaration, signed in 1948, and the two International Human Rights Covenants, adopted in 1966, do not include any reference to a right to a healthy environment.

When I had the honour to serve as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, from 1997 to 2002, climate change was not on the radar of human rights institutions. 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. Constance is a powerful woman, a leader in her community and uses the full extent of her agency to both adapt to the impacts of climate change, and warn the world of the consequences of our fossil fuel based development. Today, I am struck by her courage in the face of heightening adversity, and I fear for her community’s future if our capacity for empathy is outstripped by reluctance to change.

Eleanor Roosevelt never considered the risks of man-made interference in our climate system when she chaired the Commission to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – but climate change now is a matter of human rights. Similarly, when I served as President of Ireland, the thought never occurred to me that someday I would have to tell my people that, because of the industrial activities of richer and more powerful countries, our country would soon no longer exist. But this is the reality for Presidents of some small island states.

Last month I met with President Hilde Heine of the Marshall Islands in New York during the General Assembly. She reminded me, as Anote Tong, former President of Kiribati had done before, that leading a small island state in the 21st Century poses unconscionable challenges.

When he was President of Kiribati, Anote Tong was forced to buy land on a Fijian island to allow his people to “migrate with dignity” when the time comes that rising sea levels would make life on their low-lying atoll home no longer viable.

And yet these most vulnerable countries are demonstrating the most ambitious leadership when it comes to tackling climate change. At the Pacific Island Forum in Nauru in early September the leaders of the Pacific states declared that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.

President Heine and her government want to show that if one of the smallest and most isolated nations can make the transition to net zero emissions by 2050, then so can everyone else, including the big emitters. There is no excuse for inaction.

It gives me hope to stand here in front of you today. You can be the leaders of tomorrow, but this work must start today. I implore you to take up the climate justice mantle.

The warnings contained within the IPCC report couldn't be clearer – the scientists tell us that, by 2030, we need to have reduced global emissions by 45% and set ourselves on a path to a safer, fairer future. I am calling on all of you to become leaders for climate justice.

The IPCC report heralds the end of the fossil fuel era. We have entered a new reality where fossil fuel companies have lost their legitimacy and social licence to operate and where we must embark on a just

transition to protect people and their rights as we embrace unprecedented levels of climate action. The young leaders in this world who pioneer this just transition will be working for the benefit of all humanity.

We now live in a world that is almost unrecognisable from the the time when I was setting out on my professional career here in The Hague. There is more prosperity, technology has advanced beyond what was imaginable in those days and more people are realising their rights. But there is great, and worsening, inequality and a climate crisis that is threatening to render all our progress futile. 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. Our world can be much healthier, much fairer and we can live sustainably with the ecosystem of the earth that sustains us.

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.

Achieving climate justice is the space race for your generation – it is far bigger, more complex and more global than the challenge faced by NASA in the 1960s – but you have many more tools at your disposal. You must rise to the challenge of achieving climate justice. The IPCC report gives us a window of 12 years - we have no time to lose.