

**Creative responses to Climate Change: A Market Place For Ideas**

**Keynote Address by Mary Robinson**

**5th November 2018**

**Realising a Just Transition to a 1.5°C World**

**The struggle to secure climate justice is a global struggle – from Hindou’s community in Chad to our communities here in Ireland – climate change is already affecting all of our lives. In a report<sup>1</sup> of his visit to Ireland last month, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to a Healthy Environment, David R. Boyd, stated that there is no doubt that climate change is already violating the right to life and other human rights. He warns that in the future, these violations will expand in terms of geographic scope, severity, and the number of people affected, unless effective measures are implemented in the short term to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect natural carbon sinks.**

**Only a global movement can mobilise the transformation needed to prevent an irreversible climate crisis and only a climate just transformation - one that protects the rights of all people - can be sustainable and protect both people and the planet.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Boyd, D. (2018) Statement on the human rights obligations related to climate change, with a particular focus on the right to life. UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Environment, October 25, 2018. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Environment/FriendsIrishEnvironment25Oct2018.pdf>

**This is why I am encouraging everyone in Ireland to take the issue personally, to reduce their consumption, reuse and recycle, and become more energy efficient. If we all take it seriously we will put more pressure on government to take more action.**

**The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, released last month, heralds the end of the fossil fuel era. We have entered a new reality. Fossil fuel companies have lost their legitimacy and social licence to operate. Just as it is with tobacco, selling a product that is known to cause harm is not socially or ethically acceptable.**

**What is required now is a just transition to a cleaner, healthier world – one which protects people and their rights as we embrace unprecedented levels of climate action. We need to jump start a collective consciousness to save ourselves, and that consciousness must have justice and the protection of people and their rights at its core.**

**Limiting global warming to 1.5°C would reduce the number of people exposed to climate risk and poverty by several millions by 2050. It would reduce the risk of drought, extreme precipitation and hot extremes, when compared to warming of 2°C.**

**But even at 1.5°C climate risks are inevitable and they will disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable people and communities in all countries, with Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States amongst the countries most at risk. These risks are to health, to food security, water supply, human security and economic growth, and all risks increase the more the planet warms.**

**So climate action on an unprecedented scale is required. Due to the pace and magnitude of the transition, it will pose risks to human rights and sustainable development if not carefully managed. For example, 1.5°C pathways include large scale land-use changes to grow fuel for bioenergy that could compete with food production and cause food insecurity.**

**When we think back to the push for biofuels in the 2000s, we recall how it displaced land for growing food to grow fuel resulting in food price volatility. It increased pressures on land in all regions of the world, causing local communities to fear evictions, small food producers to be priced out of land markets and led people to protest in the streets to highlight the rising prices for staple foods.**

**Ethics and human rights can help to manage and reduce the risks of climate action at the pace and scale needed to meet the 1.5°C goal. The IPCC Special Report finds that ‘the design of the mitigation portfolios and policy instruments to limit warming to 1.5°C will largely determine the overall synergies and trade-offs between mitigation and sustainable development’<sup>2</sup>. In my Foundation we have been saying this is a less technical form of words for several years now. In order to reduce the risks posed to people and their development by climate action, all climate action has to be informed by human rights and equity.**

**In fact, action to achieve the 1.5°C goal can go hand in hand and have multiple synergies with sustainable development, poverty reduction and reducing inequality, if designed with people and their rights at the centre. A zero carbon future is compatible with a zero poverty future, if justice and rights inform the transition.**

---

<sup>2</sup> IPCC, 2018. Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5oC. Chapter 5. [http://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15\\_chapter5.pdf](http://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_chapter5.pdf)

**I would like to discuss what this means in the context of a just transition. The concept of a just transition has its origins in the labour movement, aiming to secure the future and livelihoods of workers and their communities in the transition to a low-carbon economy. It is based on social dialogue, participation and a commitment to human rights. It is ‘an economy-wide process that produces the plans, policies and investments that lead to a future where all jobs are green and decent, greenhouse gas emissions are at net-zero, poverty is eradicated, and communities are thriving and resilient.’<sup>3</sup>**

**The transition has already begun. It will be down to national and local governments to work with unions and the fossil fuel companies to ensure that workers in the fossil fuel industry are not forgotten in this global struggle to save our planet. The challenge we face is to design and manage the next industrial revolution - the transition to a zero carbon, climate resilient future - with minimal negative effects on workers and communities.**

**There are, unfortunately, too many examples of unjust transitions away from fossil fuels. We are all acutely aware of the suffering brought by the closure of coalmines in England, Wales and Scotland during the 1980s.**

---

<sup>3</sup> ITUC Just Transition Centre. <https://www.ituc-csi.org/just-transition-centre>

**Collieries were shut down and the miners went out on strike. The Margaret Thatcher government vilified the unions and the workers who stood up for their rights were plunged into poverty. Communities in Durham, Kent, Yorkshire, South Wales and central Scotland, the heartlands of the industrial revolution, were left to bear the brunt of the social, economic and environmental fallout from the mining closures. The impacts continue to be felt in these communities to this day. It is unconscionable to neglect the communities upon whose labour a nation built its affluence.**

**In my book, ‘Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience and the Fight for a Sustainable Future’<sup>4</sup>, I tell the story of Ken Smith, a lead-zinc-copper miner and union leader from Canada. His story captures the complexity of challenges and opportunities presented by a just transition.**

**Ken realised that the mine he worked in, and that his community relied on, was inevitably going to close as zinc prices collapsed on the global market. He decided to “prepare for the worst” and negotiated a closure agreement with both the government and the mining company to fund the development of a transition plan. The transition plan focused on providing support for workers to cushion against redundancy, train in new skills and source new employment in the Bathurst area.**

---

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, M. (2018). Climate Justice: Hope, resilience and the fight for a sustainable future. Chapter 9.

**Ken and his union colleagues even succeeded in securing the creation of a national program to recognize and certify the skills and competencies of mining workers.**

**As a result, Ken and many of his friends and co-workers secured new jobs in the Alberta Oil Sands thousands of miles away from Bathurst. But they didn't manage to create new jobs that would allow them to stay at home, and many members of the community didn't want to leave or couldn't leave due to family commitments and ties. Marriages and families broke up as the men in the community moved away to find work and Bathurst lost its soul. For Ken aged 56, it was hard to leave home. As he says 'even us old guys get homesick'.**

**Now Ken is a union leader in Fort McMurray in Alberta where he moved with his wife to find work. He realises that the 3,500 oil tar sand workers will soon face the same plight as his Bathurst colleagues. He knows climate change is real and that fossil fuels have a limited future. Most of the workers in Fort McMurray have moved there out of necessity as they lost their jobs in other mines and failed industries. In Ken's words 'they know the tide is coming in', they just want to prepare themselves to move on to a new job. He believes that preparation is way better than resistance'.**

**Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, echoes Ken's calls for preparation and partnership with workers to shape a just transition.**

**She knows it can work. In her native Australia, the town of Port Augusta faced the closure of the coal fired power station on which the local economy depended. In the five years leading up to the plant's closure in 2016, the workers, local businesses, citizens and the union came together to forge a just transition plan.**

**The plan was informed by research that found that a solar thermal plant was the best option for a smooth skill transfer from the coal powered plant and for a long term clean energy solution. The solar plant will create 1,800 jobs and save 5 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions<sup>5</sup>. But it will also support the wider community to thrive and reap the benefits of a zero carbon future.**

---

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, M. (2018). Climate Justice: Hope, resilience and the fight for a sustainable future. Chapter 9.



**The need for a just transition has arisen in the last few weeks in the context of peat production here in Ireland. For decades, workers in communities all around the midlands have earned a living and served the people of Ireland by harvesting peat to heat our homes and power our industries. However, we now know that peat is the worst of fossil fuels we burn for energy.**

**The motives to end our peat harvesting activities are indisputable. Peat generates less energy per tonne than coal and produces higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per unit. Burning it is an inefficient and polluting way to create energy. There is no economic argument for maintaining peat as a fuel source – or subsidising its production, although in 2016 the sector received €115 million in subsidies to generate peat-fired electricity.**

**However, the need for an urgent end to peat extraction must not undermine the rights of the communities whose lives are dependent on the bogs. There needs to be a long-term strategy in place that ensures the rights and dignity of the people whose lives are impacted by this transition. With the right support from the Government, and through partnership with workers and unions, Bord na Móna has the opportunity to plan and deliver a just transition strategy to end the use of peat for energy production by 2028 or even earlier.**

**Ken and Sharan's experiences show the importance of dialogue, partnership and planning in shaping a just transition, so the imperative is to start that planning now.**

**I am pleased to be an honorary leader of a group of business leaders called the B Team. Our mission is to catalyse a better way of doing business for the wellbeing of people and planet. I co-chair the B Team's Working Group on Net Zero Emissions that aims to reduce emissions to zero by 2050 through a just transition. Business leaders that join this progressive team commit to ensuring that their ambitious transition plans account for the positive and negative impacts on workers and communities, and work in partnership with stakeholders to ensure the transition is just and fair.**

**Companies giving this leadership include Kering, Unilever, Dow, Tiffany, Natura and Safaricom. They share their progress and experiences towards the twin goals of decarbonisation and just transition with their peers, and have committed to sharing an annual report on the progress they are making. The first Progress Report<sup>6</sup> was published in January this year and shows companies taking their initial steps to understand and plan for a just transition.**

---

<sup>6</sup> B Team (2018) Progress Towards Net-Zero by 2050. <http://www.bteam.org/announcements/report-launch-progress-towards-net-zero-by-2050-challenges-trends-teamwork-2/>

**They are doing this informed by the Just Transition Guide for Business, developed by the Just Transition Centre of the International Trade Union Congress and the BTeam<sup>7</sup>, as well as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All<sup>8</sup>.**

**The Progress Report shows companies on a just transition pathway. They have a long way to go, but they are sharing what they are learning along the way in the hope of inspiring others to follow their lead. For example, Natura, a beauty product company based in Brazil invites its workers to training sessions and meetings to discuss its net-zero strategy and how it could affect the workforce and the wider community.**

**Social dialogue and the right to participation lie at the heart of a just transition. The worst thing a company can do is deny that change is going to happen and fail to prepare and engage workers, suppliers and the wider community for the inevitable. Coal miners, oil, gas and peat workers, all need to have an active role in deciding what they want their future to be. It cannot be imposed on them.**

---

<sup>7</sup> Just Transition Centre and BTeam (2018) Just Transition: A business guide. [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/just\\_transition\\_-\\_a\\_business\\_guide.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/just_transition_-_a_business_guide.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> International Labour Organisation (2015) Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies For All. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/documents/publication/wcms\\_432859.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_432859.pdf)

**It takes time and investment to ensure that communities remain vibrant and jobs secure. Workers need support to reskill and access training to find new jobs, or if close to retirement age, to gain early access to their pension. The right to participate and to be part of this decision making is key.**

**The Just Transition Centre and BTeam business guide to a just transition<sup>9</sup> identifies three key steps companies and governments need to take in addition to having clear policies and plans on both climate actions and human rights. I will present these briefly now and commend them to all involved in shaping a just transition in the Irish and international contexts.**

**The first step is to engage employers, workers and unions, as well as government, communities and civil society in a just transition planning dialogue. The second is to plan with all stakeholders to develop a concrete, time bound, company and sectoral strategy for a just transition. Finally, all stakeholders must enact the strategy.**

---

<sup>9</sup> Just Transition Centre and BTeam (2018) Just Transition: A business guide. [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/just\\_transition\\_-\\_a\\_business\\_guide.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/just_transition_-_a_business_guide.pdf)

**Social protection will be critical to protect people who lose their jobs while they reskill and find new jobs. There is a role for government to provide a social protection system but also for companies to ensure that contributions and taxes are paid in full so that workers can claim health benefits, social welfare, pensions etc. Investment will also be needed in education and training so that the oil and gas worker of today, for example, can retrain and upskill as a solar engineer, an IT specialist, or whatever they want to reinvent themselves as. Change is as we know inevitable – and planning for it is key.**

**As Bord na Móna moves to seize the opportunity it sees in its renewable and fossil fuel free future, parallel efforts must ensure that the workers are supported in finding the path to their future too. As it winds down its peat business, which I believe it can do well in advance of the 2028 target, it will need to spearhead a collaborative and inclusive effort to develop new businesses to support the low-carbon economy and create 400-500 jobs across the midlands.**

**We can look to Spain for inspiration, where the government recently announced plans to shut down most of its coalmines by the end of the year after government and unions struck a deal that will mean €250 million will be invested in a just transition in mining regions over the next decade.**

**This type of investment is critical if we are to adopt a ‘leave no one behind’ approach to the transition away from coal, peat, oil and gas in Ireland.**

**A core Principle of Climate Justice is the right to participate in climate decision making. This is why it is imperative to engage all stakeholders, government, workers, businesses, citizens and unions in dialogue about what lies ahead; to engage, plan and enact a just transition together so that fear is minimised and replaced with hope and opportunity.**

**Ultimately, we must reimagine, not just how we power our economies and our societies, but how we build fairer structures that ensure all people can be part of the transition to a fairer and safer world. We need to move rapidly to a zero carbon future. We either do that justly or unjustly. A just transition will leave no one behind, not the pastoralists in Hindou’s community, the miners in Port Augusta or the peat workers in the midlands of Ireland. A just transition will uphold rights and empower people to play their part in achieving a zero carbon world.**

**The UN Declaration for Human Rights states that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’. In times of great change those rights must be protected. This year the Declaration is 70 years old.**

**The world has changed immeasurably in that period of time, yet the principles and values that underpin the Declaration and our shared humanity remain more relevant than ever.**

**Two of the many great women have inspired me in my life are Eleanor Roosevelt, who led the process that resulted in the UN Declaration for Human Rights after World War II, and Wangari Maathai, leader of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. I leave you with words of inspiration from each of them.**

**Firstly, from Eleanor Roosevelt in a speech that she gave at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1948: ‘The future must see the broadening of human rights throughout the world. People who have glimpsed freedom will never be content until they have secured it for themselves. In a truest sense, human rights are a fundamental object of law and government in a just society.’<sup>10</sup>**

**Wangari Maathi picked up the same sentiment up decade later when she said: ‘In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called upon to switch to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground.’**

**That time is now.**

---

<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt, E (1948) The Struggle for Human Rights. September 28, 1948 Paris, France. [http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/eleanor\\_roosevelt\\_rights.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/eleanor_roosevelt_rights.html)