

# MARY ROBINSON

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## “SHARING THE UNEQUAL BURDENS OF GLOBAL WARMING – CLIMATE JUSTICE AND OUR GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY”

It is an honour and a special challenge to speak about climate justice to such a distinguished audience here in Kuala Lumpur. The honour is to give the 9<sup>th</sup> lecture in the Khazanah Global Lecture Series, which was initiated to celebrate Malaysia’s 50<sup>th</sup> year of independence in 2007. You have heard from very distinguished speakers, ranging from prime ministers to business leaders and Noble Laureates. Your audience includes your own top leadership, but also a number of universities who can participate on-line and ask questions at the appropriate time.

The challenge of the subject I have chosen is to be able to understand well enough how Malaysia fits into the global responsibility required by a climate justice approach to global warming. I have read with interest the publication of Khazanah Nasional: “Opportunities and Risks Arising From Climate Change for Malaysia”. This acknowledges openly that in 2008 Malaysia was identified as having the highest growth rate of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the world. In response to that, “a conditional voluntary target to reduce emission intensity of GDP by up to 40%” was announced by your Prime Minister at Copenhagen. But the report also acknowledges that Malaysia will not achieve the 40% reduction target if business remains as usual. In that respect, Malaysia is like most countries in the world who are responsible for significant CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, including my own country Ireland. We are not on target for the reductions we need to achieve if we continue with business as usual.

So how do we change course! How do we become convinced that this is the biggest human rights and development challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? A challenge that involves the very future of humanity and of a livable earth? My belief is that to change course it will be necessary for each country, in its context, to adopt a more people centered, and what I will describe as a climate justice approach.

I first became critically aware of the justice impacts of climate change when I was preparing The Barbara Ward Memorial Lecture in 2006. Barbara Ward, an eminent intellectual, moral voice, visionary, and superb communicator, established the International Institute for Environment & Development (IIED) in London in 1973, whose board I chaired for four years. Her great insight was that environment and development were inextricably linked and she argued forcefully for development that offered hope both for today’s poor and tomorrow’s

children. Her legacy should guide us all as we wrestle with climate change and it certainly guides me when I seek the human rights dimension in any given policy area – including climate change.

I believe that for too long, climate change discussions have stagnated in the realm of science, a cause and consequence of three misconceptions in industrialised countries – that endured for far too long but are now, thankfully, disappearing but are not yet gone. The three misconceptions are: that the negative effects of climate change are a possibility rather than a probability, that they are a threat to the future, not the present, and that they will affect plants and animals more than humans.

The 2006 report by world-renowned economist Nick Stern was the first of its kind to chip away at these perceptions. Now, as I witness firsthand in my travels, it is evident that climate change is already a reality for millions of people and its consequences are especially stark for impoverished communities in developing countries.

Across the world, people are struggling to secure basic necessities due to rapidly-changing environmental conditions. Farmers no longer know when to plant and when to harvest as a result of shifting seasonal patterns. Erratic rainfall has led to cycles of drought and flood. ‘Rogue’ weather events have destroyed the lives and livelihoods of the poor. And rising sea levels threaten entire communities, in the Maldives, Bangladesh, Vietnam and the majority of Africa’s coastal cities.

The image of a polar bear stranded on a shrinking ice floe, often used to convey the impact of climate change only begins to capture the real picture. Instead, our image of climate change must focus on people - people increasingly unable to provide for basic necessities of food, water, shelter, due to rapidly changing environmental conditions and often forced to cope with devastating impacts such as increases in migration, conflicts over natural resources and even the very existence of their countries being threatened. And we must not forget the special challenges and risks that women face, not least as the main collectors of water and gatherers of firewood in developing countries.

As things stand, global concentrations of greenhouse gases cannot increase by very much more, if we are to stop average temperatures from rising 2 degrees, the target set at Copenhagen (and one that will involve very much hardship for people in certain parts of the world).

However, none of the main emitting countries currently have policies in place that would achieve this goal. One important reason for this is that the immensity of the task of emission reductions is frightening for rich world governments. Here in Malaysia the “the conditional

voluntary target” of 40% reduction of emissions would have to become enforceable through law and policy. It is simply hard to see how global emissions can be reduced by 90%, even over 40 years. As a result there has been a lot of talk of achieving global cuts by acting in low-emission countries. Acting to put clean technology in poor countries is immensely important. But it is not a substitute for cutting at home. By definition, there is less room to cut there than here.

In truth we have reached the limits of the world’s development space and from now on the challenge will be to ensure it is equitably distributed. Factor in development needs and population growth and the scale of the task comes quickly apparent.

Equally obviously, we cannot sit back and resign ourselves to the possibility that we will overshoot our targets and so have to adapt to a changing climate—the second kind of management. For our capacity to adapt will depend on how well we have succeeded in stalling or impeding climate change in the first place. Our adaptive ability depends not only on the *degree* of climate change that eventually happens—and of course it becomes more difficult with every marginal increase in global average temperatures. It also depends on the *predictability* of the effects—for we can only prepare for outcomes that we can reasonably expect.

Unfortunately, the more we allow climate change to take hold, the more unpredictable will be the effects. This is true for a variety of reasons, including the existence of feedback loops and the complexity of the world’s climate, which is beyond even our best models. There are degrees of mismanagement, and each further step we take into a world of climate unpredictability will bring in its wake an ever expanding group of likely victims. But the actual vulnerability of individuals in any given case will be ever less predictable.

At the same time, we can see who are likely to suffer most. There are ways in which we will all suffer, of course, from the loss of biodiversity, of plant and animal life that climate change will reap. These are losses to the planet and to humankind as such. But there are also very particular people and groups who will bear tremendous personal costs. For the most part, the numbers of these people remain large and somewhat vague, couched in the language of probability.

Flooding in the low-lying delta areas of Bangladesh, which I have just come from, are predicted to affect 20 million people. This figure is too large to comprehend: it fails the imagination. In time these shadowy figures will begin to take on flesh and blood attributes, as we begin with more confidence to attribute floods and other extreme weather events to climate change. The recent floods in Pakistan, for example, are a case in point: they took place at a time when freshwater flows have increased by 18% since 1994, challenging the

existing flood-control infrastructure in many countries. Were the flood victims also climate victims? Questions of this kind will no doubt always be somewhat contestable, but as climate-events proliferate their man-made cause will become ever more difficult to deny.

But there are plenty of concrete examples of populations vulnerable to climate harms right now. Inuit groups in Alaska and Northern Canada testified, in a legal brief taken to a regional human rights tribunal, to the degree to which their lifestyles had already been impacted by changing coastlines and the altered migratory patterns of fish and animals. Sami reindeer herders in Norway have voiced similar concerns about the depletion of their livelihoods. The populations of sinking islands such as Kiribati and Tuvalu are increasingly treating their plight as urgent. In some cases, small island governments are supporting proactive emigration to, and even seeking territory in, less vulnerable neighbouring countries.

But beyond these considerations of individual harms, the question 'who will suffer?' is also a much larger question, one that I call 'climate justice'. What is climate justice? Perhaps the most straightforward way to conceive it is to ask the question: who will carry the costs of climate change? The costs include not only the actual damage to lives and livelihoods caused by changing weather patterns. They also include the costs of adapting and the costs of having to either stall development or to develop in new and untried ways. Viewed in this way, the degree to which climate change carries the potential for grossly cruel and unfair outcomes begins to come into focus.

Like so many around the world, I had hoped that the COP15 conference in Copenhagen in 2009 would signal a course correction for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. But no fair, ambitious and binding deal emerged. Collectively, our politicians failed us. They did not rise above narrow national self-interest, a self-interest driven too often by climate sceptics and the fossil fuel industries.

Under Mexican leadership, COP16 in Cancun ended with the adoption of a package of decisions, dubbed the Cancun Agreements, that put the UNFCCC process back on track, and set all governments more firmly on the path towards a low emissions future. The Agreements acknowledge the goal of reducing emissions from industrialised countries by 25 – 40% (relative to 1990) by 2020, and support enhanced action on climate change in the developing world, notably by the establishment of a Green Climate Fund, having a Board with equal representation from developed and developing countries.

We need a sense of urgency and of opportunity, both of which are part of a climate justice approach. A climate justice approach recognizes that the world's peoples have the right to development, but economic development should occur in a sustainable manner that does

not contribute to further negative climatic changes. I am glad to see that Malaysia is looking to position itself on a low-carbon growth path.

Climate justice demands that those most affected by environmental changes, and least able to cope, such as those with limited resources, assets, and status, must be genuine partners in all efforts to address climate change. And the gender dimensions of climate change must be recognized, including through policies and actions that address how natural resource deficits affect women's work and prospects for empowerment and ensure that women's voices and priorities are heard and responded to equally.

In terms of global and national policy-making, a climate justice approach means building greater awareness amongst political leaders and the broader public about the interconnectedness of climate change with issues of development and social justice. All efforts to address the threats posed by climate change must be carried out in ways that buttress the principles of sustainable development. Climate justice also demands that the rights, needs, and voices of those most affected by environmental changes—particularly those living in poverty, the disempowered, the marginalized, women, and indigenous peoples—be recognized, heard, and given priority in global debates on mitigation and adaptation strategies. In addition, such strategies must target benefits to, and address potential unintended negative consequences for, vulnerable and marginalized groups.

A climate justice approach also means that development and transfer of low-carbon, affordable, and appropriate technologies are scaled up to reach low-income households, as well as countries as a whole. Global partnerships and a spirit of cooperation are key to achieving climate justice, with campaigns, policies, and programs providing a platform for solidarity and shared engagement. Finally, climate justice builds on a foundation of human rights, with attention to accountability, equality, participation, and transparency in the content of policies and in implementation processes.

Just as each of us must take action in our own lives to recycle, reuse and reduce waste, we must urge our elected officials to understand not only that failure to act is unacceptable but also that tackling climate change, far from threatening economies, is an opportunity to create green jobs and a sustainable future.

Let me turn to the important role of universities worldwide – many of which are now researching the impacts of climate change and how to mitigate global warming. This is not a theoretical problem; as we know the impacts are already being felt in the poorest countries, which have not contributed in any significant way to the problem. For example it is estimated that the whole of Africa has produced less than 4% of the greenhouse gas emissions which cause global warming. How do we address the justice and equity of this?

We need to broaden the debate from a technical discussion about mitigation, adaptation, technical development, and financial aspects, to find a values-framework based on principles of justice and equity. Climate change could induce a level of forced migration that has never been witnessed in human history – it is estimated that there could be some two hundred million additional “environmental” migrants by 2050. There needs to be much more focus on the humanitarian, human rights and socio-economic impacts that are already affecting the capacity of the poorest countries to reach the millennium development goals of 2015.

Universities are responding to this challenge and some are forming inter-disciplinary climate justice groups. Irish universities are beginning to contribute at all levels to this debate, from the technical to the humanitarian, and to give leadership in ensuring that there is early transfer of green technologies to the developing countries with which we have strong relationships. Climate justice is not a separate discipline but one with relevance to numerous specialties across all faculties of a university. I am sure some of the universities here in Malaysia are doing very important work on climate change, and I would encourage them to think of forming climate justice groups in the university. The role of the universities is very important in enabling students and wider communities to chart the way forward.

It is worth noticing that one country has already pledged to be carbon-neutral by 2020. That is the Maldives. The Maldives, of course, is a tiny polluter, and its efforts will have no noticeable impact on climate change. But there lies the rub. The Maldives is likely to sink before the century is out, and cannot, by itself, do anything about it. So it is showing the way to the rest of us.

The Maldives story shows us two things. On one hand, this problem will only be fixed through concerted global action. As long as the energy used in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole (700 million persons) continues to be matched by that of greater New York City (19 million), we cannot expect to fix it.

On the other hand, however, countries don't have to wait for international negotiations to be resolved in order to take steps to treat climate change. They can act on their own. They can show the way. Even if they cannot lead the world, they can show what leadership is. They can do the right thing. They can light a candle rather than cursing the darkness. They can start to think through what a responsible economic policy would look like in a climate justice world. They can begin to enact R&D policies that focus on green technologies. They can begin to explore means of transferring technologies to countries badly needing them.

So it turns out that a debate about climate change is actually a conversation about many other things. About growth, about energy, about technology, about economic policy, about

international relations, about ethical leadership, about what a *global* policy might look like, and, indeed, about the impossibility, henceforth, of not having one.

But this aspect of climate change—the way it changes how we talk and think about everything else—is not always obvious in the way we talk about climate change itself. Too often we still talk about the weather. Or we get nervous about the implications for a given government of taking unpopular steps, with elections always looming up ahead. Or we debate the science and the scandals.

Perhaps it is time we started instead, to talk about justice. When we do, many of the answers will begin to appear much more obvious.

It was my firm belief that we must focus on justice that led me to establish the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice ([mrfcj.org](http://mrfcj.org)) under the Innovation Alliance of two universities: Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin. We will not be building a major enterprise, rather we will be a “lean, mean machine” focusing on solidarity, partnership and shared engagement with all interested in climate justice. We will provide a space for facilitating action on climate justice and we plan to make our website a “global-stop-shop” for up to date and accurate information on the topic and best practices for solutions to inequities faced by the most vulnerable. And we will always be focused on sustainable and people-centred development.

So in conclusion, let me refer back to how I ended The Barbara Ward Memorial Lecture in 2006. I did so with a quote from her – which is unfortunately as true today as it was almost 40 years ago.

In her book *Only One Earth*, published in 1972 for the [UN Stockholm](#) conference on the Human Environment, she said: “*We have forgotten how to be good guests, how to walk lightly on the earth as other creatures do.*”

In countries such as Malaysia and Ireland we need to learn to be better guests on this earth