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Climate Justice – Putting People at the Centre of the Climate Debate

Remarks by Mary Robinson

I would like to thank the United Nations Association of the UK, and in particular its Chair, Lord Hannay, and Executive Director Sam Daws, for inviting me today. It's also a privilege to share the podium today with my good friend Helen Clark, who has thoughtfully pointed out important ways we can accelerate progress on the Millennium Development Goals.

I would like to use my remarks today to reflect on the links between development, climate change and human rights. We will not make lasting progress in any of these areas unless we make progress on all of them.

Many of you might be wondering why, given the range of ongoing human rights violations which continue around the world, I have become so interested in climate change, and more specifically, climate justice, over the past few years. The answer is twofold. First, current and projected climate change impacts represent what is arguably the greatest threat to human rights that the world will ever see. And second, because I am now a grandmother, I have a great fear for what awaits my grandchildren, and future generations on all continents, if we do not immediately get greenhouse gas emissions under control.

In 2007 I was asked to give the annual Barbara Ward lecture for IIED – the International Institute for Environment and Development – here in London. I welcomed the opportunity so my colleagues and I began to investigate what had been written or said about climate change and human rights. We found very little. Yet it was clear that the human rights framework contained within its principles and legal obligations that should inform and influence international responses to climate change.

The problem was obvious. For far too long, we left climate change discussions primarily within the realm of science. As the UNFCCC went about their work, there was a general perception amongst the public – especially in industrialized countries which are the largest emitters of greenhouse gases – that negative impacts of climate change were, first, a possibility rather than a certainty; second, a threat to the future rather than to the present; and third, a threat to plants, trees and animals more so than to humans. Yet the fact is that none of these is true.

The Stern Report that came out a few years ago was very important in that it was led by a world-renowned economist who confirmed that climate change brings with it enormous negative economic impacts that must be dealt with sooner rather than later. But climate

change still remained within the realm of the technical, and the sense given was of change far into the future. There was too little sense of urgency.

As I'm sure everyone in this room knows – and as I continue to hear and witness firsthand in my travels, especially in Africa, the impacts of climate change are happening today and are already of great consequence, in particular on impoverished communities in developing countries.

Not so long ago, the public image of climate change impacts was a polar bear stranded on a shrinking ice floe. This image is profound, but only begins to capture the real picture. Our image of climate change must increasingly focus on people - stranded by extreme weather events – people increasingly unable to provide for basic necessities – food, water, shelter, due to rapidly changing environmental conditions.

The climate change image we must all come to see is of everyday people, buffeted by storms – in diverse places across our planet.

The faces we must see are of farmers – more often than not women, like Constance Okollet of Uganda – coping with increasingly unpredictable weather as she and her community plant and harvest and deal with floodwater in their homes.

The faces we must see are of people who live in coastal areas threatened by inexorable sea level rise, like Ursula Rakova of the Carteret Islands in the Pacific, who is even now moving her coastal community from the Pacific Island where they have lived for thousands of years to another country!

The faces we must see are of people struggling to cope, like Sharon Hanshaw from Biloxi, Mississippi, in the United States, whose community is still recovering from Hurricane Katrina, and whose home is now threatened by a very different aspect of the world's addiction to fossil fuels – the BP oil spill off the Gulf of Mexico.

I mention these three women in particular because they are part of a new initiative that my organization - Realizing Rights - has been supporting over the last 10 months called *Climate Wise Women*. The aim is to expand understanding of the human impacts of climate change, and the concept of climate justice. This idea of climate justice has been gaining momentum over the last few years.

Climate justice compels us to consider the way that environmental changes impact people differently, exacerbating problems for those who are already vulnerable – whether they are women, or children, or indigenous peoples pushed to already fragile and marginal lands. People and communities are resilient, but they face special risks. Constance Okollet of Uganda – who I'm pleased to say will be speaking in front of the UN General Assembly on Tuesday about the links between climate change and the Millennium Development Goals - are not only victims of climate change, but are leaders in finding solutions. But we must not forget the special risks women face, as the main collectors of water and gatherers of firewood, for example.

Climate justice also means recognizing shared responsibilities. People in developing countries are not responsible for this crisis, but they are paying the steepest price. We cannot afford to let our fellow human beings who are vulnerable bear the brunt. A climate justice approach demands that we distribute burdens fairly and that polluters pay. Those of us who have, over the last fifty years, rapidly used the very finite atmospheric resources we share, must be prepared to shoulder the burden of contributing to the costs of adapting to climate change and finding low-carbon growth paths for developing countries.

High levels of carbon emissions in one country do not respect national borders – across the world, farmers in developing countries, in particular, are finding seasonal patterns are shifting so that they do not know when to plant and when to harvest. Rainfall patterns are increasingly erratic – in many places, cycles of drought and floods have replaced the traditional patterns of rainfall that farmers depend upon, so that farming condemns households to a life of insecurity.

The frequency of severe storms, and what we sometimes call ‘rogue weather events’, is increasing, taking the lives of poor people, destroying livelihoods, and ruining infrastructure like roads, schools and health clinics. Sea level rise is threatening whole civilizations in places like the Carteret Islands and The Maldives. In Bangladesh, Viet Nam, and the 60% of African cities that lie on a coast, sea-level rise is slowly taking away the very land that people live on. These are only a few of the human impacts from climate change facing people across the world. And in turn these impacts cause others that may represent our greatest challenges in the future, including large scale increases in migration, and greater conflicts over land, water and other resources.

Given these enormous impacts, many of us were hopeful that the negotiators and world leaders gathered at the climate change negotiations in Copenhagen last December would act swiftly and decisively to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

But the results of Copenhagen were disappointing. We did not get the Fair, Ambitious and Binding deal that would have signaled a course correction for the UNFCCC negotiations. Our politicians generally failed us - they did not rise above narrow national self-interest, a self-interest that is too often driven by climate skeptics and the fossil fuel industries themselves.

We are now half-way through 2010. The fast-start financing promised in December has been slow to emerge. The High-Level Panel on Climate Financing put together by the UN Secretary General early this year – which, by the way, was launched without a single female member – has not made much headway. We aren’t yet seeing a significant convergence of views between governments on what needs to happen in this year – before COP 16 in Cancun, Mexico in December.

Most worryingly, the structure set up by the Copenhagen Accord that aggregates country commitments to greenhouse gas reductions rather than creating a global target toward

which all countries must aim has created the so-called ‘gigaton gap’ – the gap between the science and the pledges, an amount of emissions that will push our global temperature increase past the crisis point. On the current path, based on existing commitments, climate science tells us that we can expect a world that is 3-4 degrees warmer. If we don’t tackle emissions urgently, we will use up our global carbon budget by the 2020s. Important studies released in the last few months by Lord Stern and the UN Environment Program, by Ecofys and the Potsdam Institute, and by Project Catalyst confirm that the politics needs to catch up with the science.

There is only one solution – greater international cooperation. This requires greater awareness, greater trust, and a greater global commitment to holding political leaders accountable for protecting the rights of people across the planet. Clearly, each of us must take action in our own lives to recycle, reuse and reduce waste. But equally important, we must urge our elected officials to understand that failure to act is unacceptable. Courageous action is needed; creative thinking is imperative.

One of the greatest fears of many people is what tackling climate change will do to their economies, and specifically to their chances for employment in these uncertain economic times. But this is where I see the greatest opportunity, not a threat.

We know that we are failing to make sufficient progress on creating more and decent employment opportunities around the world, in both rich and poor countries. We have to create one billion new jobs over the coming years to ensure that all of those out of work, and those entering the workforce, can live in dignity with work that gives meaning to all of our lives.

In April this year, the Ministers of Labor and Employment of the G-20 countries agreed a Global Jobs Pact that came out of the International Labour Organization in June 2009, as well as a strengthened commitment to what is known as the Decent Work agenda. These seek to promote a productive recovery centered on investments, employment and social protection. Guided by the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, governments, employers and workers organizations committed again to economic policies that generate employment, extend social protection, respect labour standards, promote social dialogue, and shape a fair globalization.

Now these commitments must be translated into practical action. There cannot be a sustainable global economic recovery without a strong jobs recovery. And there cannot be either without a stronger emphasis on greening our economies. As you know, green jobs represent a still small but growing demand for labor that results from investments in transitioning our economies away from carbon-intensive energy to alternatives to fossil fuels. Dramatically scaling up investment in green jobs will minimize the degradation of our natural resources and expand the efficient use of labor and renewable resources. The devastation from the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico only serves to underscore the risks involved with our dependence on fossil fuels.

Climate change is arguably the starkest example of a threat we, as a community of nations, must tackle together. We must reinforce the responsibility of industrialized countries to help the poorest countries adapt to current and future environmental changes, as well as the need for dramatically increased support to low income countries so that they can develop and expand technologies to fund their own low-carbon development and to expand job creation. We need public-private partnerships that generate new zero-emission technologies that are accessible to all – especially for the billion-plus people who still lack electricity from a conventional energy grid. We need to build on the talent, expertise and enthusiasm of the hundreds of young people that were at the Rework the World Summit last week in Sweden.

Politicians will not change until they see pressure from their own constituencies – and they must also be encouraged by seeing innovation work to improve the economy and produce jobs. We have today many resources at our disposal to tackle climate change, and we have hardly begun to explore the technological innovations that will produce renewable energy sources and help create a cleaner and safer planet.

Community leaders, entrepreneurs, and academics from around the world are beginning to make a real difference. The opportunity to create greener economies is recognized by a growing number of major companies – but the fruits of greening our economies must also go to small businesses, entrepreneurs and workers around the world. I am convinced this can happen if we harness the collective potential and act together.

As Helen Clark mentioned, this September will mark the two-thirds point on the road to achieving the MDGs. We must weave together the issues of human rights, decent work, sustainable development and protecting the environment at the September Summit, and to ensure the connections between these issues remain linked in the future.

Let's take the climate justice banner that 100,000 people marched under at Copenhagen and bring it forward. And let's act now. The future of our planet depends on it.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.