

Mary Robinson Keynote Speech

# A New Vision for Multilateral Cooperation

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*My thanks to President Shava for the opportunity to address this Forum today. And to President Thomson and Deputy Secretary-General Mohammed for their opening remarks.*

We cannot just continue with business as usual. I want to begin with a personal and sombre statement, both as a former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and as a Member of The Elders, on two issues.

Today The Elders issued a strong statement expressing our concern and moral outrage about the famines now threatening South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen. We called on the leaders of the four countries to protect their people and the international community to increase, not diminish, its support to them. We welcomed the efforts of Secretary General Guterres to draw attention to the suffering and we support his call for adequate funding for humanitarian operations. Any country facing famine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an indictment of us all. We should hang our heads in shame.

The second issue is the tragedy of the Syrian people, a priority of The Elders from the beginning of the war there. We have now seen another use of chemical weapons, killing dozens of people including children. This is a war crime and a crime against humanity. It, too, is shameful.

This is the dark background against which we speak today of a new vision for multilateral cooperation.

Today, more than ever, we are in need of a unifying vision that can bind the international community together in the face of our world's greatest collective challenge - overcoming the existential threat of climate change while enabling sustainable development for all. Our success will be dependent on our ability to maintain and strengthen a multilateral process that can stimulate inclusive global responses that work. But we are living through troubled times, where trust between nations is being eroded, undermining our ability to respond to these complex and interlinked global challenges. ECOSOC, as the United Nations' central platform for reflection, debate, and innovative thinking on sustainable development, has a critical role to play in nurturing a new vision of partnership and international cooperation based on a shared sense of mutual interdependence.

In 2015, world leaders demonstrated a clear understanding that no one country alone can protect its citizens from the impacts of climate change. The global transformation - envisioned by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Paris Agreement on Climate Change – sent a clear signal that we must find a common path forward, based on a shared understanding of both the threats and the opportunities ahead.

But to pioneer new sustainable development pathways, we need to develop an entirely new paradigm for collaboration. We must remove the silos which have, for too long, divided government, civil society and the private sector. The success of this global transformation hinges on our ability to work towards new partnerships based on - as the 2030 Agenda states - “a spirit of global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable”.

A little over a year on from those historic accords, the collaborative spirit in which the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement were concluded seems to be under attack from rising waves of populism and myopic decision making. Yet the urgency for collaborative action on the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement could not be greater.

Traditional fossil fuel based development has brought our global community to the brink of a climate crisis that threatens our very existence, the impacts of which are already being felt by those least responsible for the emissions which got us here. This is the injustice of

climate change and it can only be remedied through action that is based on inclusivity, trust and a shared understanding of the opportunities and risks ahead.

A new vision for global partnership must weave together the interlinked challenges of advancing sustainable development and stabilising the climate system. Climate justice can provide the basis for this approach, recognizing that taking climate action and ensuring a safer world for future generations is about a just transition; eliminating fossil fuel emissions while ensuring that people everywhere have their rights upheld and share the benefits of sustainable development.

Agenda 2030 compels countries to “reach the furthest behind first” in delivering the Sustainable Development Goals and to leave no one behind. The challenge is greatest in the Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing States where poverty and vulnerability are the immediate priority. Yet these are also the countries that are giving the most ambitious leadership on climate action. In 2016 the 48 countries of the Climate Vulnerable Forum committed to playing their part in achieving the 1.5°C goal, peaking global emissions by 2020 at the latest, and achieving carbon neutrality by the 2050s.

I am inspired by their call for “a new era of the pursuit of development, ending poverty, leaving no person behind and protecting the environment” and for an international co-operative system that is fully equipped to address climate change. This is precisely the right vision and attitude — and must inform the partnerships needed to drive global development.

Linked to this leadership by the countries most vulnerable to climate change is the need to ensure the right to participation of front line people and communities in climate decision making. We need to listen in particular to grassroots women and value their knowledge and contribution to climate action. By creating spaces for the voices of community leaders to inform discussions in the ECOSOC chamber, members can ensure that the conversations here are informed by the practical understanding of local challenges and local solutions.

Climate justice is the antithesis of the short termism that is today causing nations to choose protectionism over international cooperation. Our future security and prosperity depends not on the strength of our borders or the size of our armies, but on the depth of our education systems and the extent of global access to water, food and electricity.

More carbon pollution means more climate risks which pose threats to food production, health, human security and human rights. Uncontrolled climate change is incompatible with the eradication of poverty. And achievement of climate goals including access to sustainable energy for all is a driver of development.

The question is whether countries have real choices between sustainable and business as usual development options. The infrastructure decisions being taken today in countries around the world shape the development trajectory for the next 40 or 50 years. So a decision to invest in a coal fired power station today will lock in coal usage for decades to come. In developing countries, support from industrialised countries will be needed to make sustainable alternatives a real alternative to the fossil fuels based systems that have dominated to date.

With this in mind the need to align the “billions to trillions” infrastructure agenda with the SDGs requires careful attention to ensure that civil society can engage meaningfully in improving the public governance of infrastructure. The public interest must always shape the public private partnerships and other modalities that will finance a new wave of investment in infrastructure. The integration of Environmental Social and Governance reporting can help to improve both corporate and public financial performance.

The private sector must be an active contributor to sustainable development that respects human rights and labour rights, and upholds environmental and governance standards in their global operations, including throughout their supply chains. By strengthening each country’s commitment to implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and developing substantive National Action Plans on the implementation of these principles, the public and private sectors can develop partnerships that further economic growth and development, eradicate poverty and inequality, and realize the SDGs.

It is important to remain cognizant that not all action which is good for the planet is automatically good for people. We require a just transition where human rights inform all climate action.

Recent experience also shows that renewable energy installations can result in human rights being undermined, if local communities are not consulted. Recent allegations of human rights infringements by renewable energy companies, have been documented by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, showing that land rights, labour rights and indigenous rights can all be undermined in the absence of appropriate checks and balances on renewable energy projects. On the other hand, engaging people in climate decision making create more buy in and support for climate action. Governments cannot achieve the SDGs or implement the Paris agreement's goals without the actions of their citizens and the support of civil society.

At times of change and anxiety such as people around the world are experiencing now, there is a risk that people and states will withdraw and attempt to go it alone. But these are precisely the times countries and communities should come together and forge new friendships and relationships. I have reflected on the ability of world leaders to rise above the devastation of world war II to create the United Nations and adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To do this they had to rise above the impossible to do what had to be done. The same spirit is needed now. No obstacle can form a barrier to progress on sustainable development.

When I think of these challenges I often reflect on the wisdom of my friend and mentor Wangari Maathai who said "In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called upon to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground." And that's what we have to do. That's what ECOSOC has to do. Rise above the challenges of our time and find a common path forward based on our shared values.

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