

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social  
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# The Importance of Community Involvement in Working for Climate Justice

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I am delighted to be invited to open this important conference which will discuss our “evolving society” and specifically, how communities must be at the heart of a just, global response to climate change.

Warm congratulations to the organisers: the International Federation of Social Workers, The International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Council on Social Welfare. Many of you have travelled from overseas to join this conference and it is my particular pleasure to welcome you here to Dublin.

In this time of heightened nationalism and xenophobia, it becomes increasingly important that we address the borders and boundaries that divide us and forge alliances of friendship and community. Strong, thriving communities will be at the forefront of progressing the solutions we need to rise to the challenges of our times.

And we must be under no illusions about the gravity of the challenges we face. In 2015, the global community came together to commit to a transformational agenda which, if achieved, would end poverty and hunger, promote equality and ensure sustainable development for all by 2030. Later in the same year, the leaders of the world committed to the Paris Agreement on climate change – an agreement which provided the means to robustly tackle the climate crisis.

However, inequality continues to increase at a startling rate, we are not yet on track to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement, and the increased tendency towards populism and isolationism underscores the need for thriving and open communities to take centre stage and push for comprehensive action on climate change and sustainable development.

There are still over one billion people living without the transformative service of electricity and so forced to live lives of daily drudgery unimaginable to those of us who take for granted the ease of life granted by the washing machine, the electric oven or the refrigerator. Now their lives and livelihoods are further undermined by the climate crisis. This is an injustice.

My Foundation is a centre for thought leadership, education and advocacy on the struggle to secure global justice for those people vulnerable to the impacts of climate change – the poor, the disempowered and the marginalised across the world. It is a platform for solidarity, partnership and shared engagement for all who care about global justice, whether as individuals and communities suffering injustice or as advocates for fairness in resource-rich societies.

Climate justice works at the intersection of climate change, development and human rights to achieve a people centred, developmental approach to addressing the climate crisis. Climate change is an existential human crisis. As such, we stand at a crossroads for our very humanity. Sometimes in the face of a challenge so great, it is easy to feel helpless.

However it is my belief that if we can change our minds and our hearts about what needs to be done, and our responsibility to do it, we can transform this moment from one of ecological, social and political uncertainty, into one of opportunity and prosperity. If we are guided by a spirit of solidarity with, and empathy for, those on the front lines of the climate crisis, we can work to turn the tide, both on climate change and global inequality.

To help ensure this, the world needs a groundswell of communities equipped, not only with the knowledge to devise solutions to the climate crisis, but also the vision to see that all people must be included in, and empowered by, the global response to the great challenges of our time.

Those of you who have come here today, you are working at the heart of our communities. You are supporting the individuals, families or groups confronted by vulnerability or marginalisation. You recognise that we need to support each other in order to move forward – you know all too well that communities will thrive once instilled with a vision of interdependence and solidarity. At the foundation of your work are the same principles that underpin climate justice – the same principles that must inform the global response to the great challenges of our time.

The first such principle is the call to recognise the primacy of dignity and respect for human rights. Climate justice, as a concept, may be new to some of you, though the injustices of climate change are no doubt apparent. The impacts of climate change - a crisis borne out of the emissions of industrialised countries - are being felt first and hardest by communities living in countries that have not reaped the benefits of that industrialisation. The impacts of climate change undermine the human rights of people living in vulnerable situations because they exacerbate existing insecurities and inequalities.

Some communities no longer know when to plant or harvest crops due to pervasive shifts in climate patterns. This is leading to increasingly acute food insecurity for large populations around the world. For others, recurrent drought or severe flooding has forced entire communities to leave their homes in search of new lives elsewhere.

The economic development experienced by countries that have long exploited fossil fuels to power their societies has not crossed borders fairly enough, yet the emissions they create have.

When I had the honour to serve as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, from 1997 to 2002, climate change was not at the front of my mind. 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.

When visiting Africa with my previous organisation, Realising Rights, I would hear stories of shifting climates when meeting communities. Their hardship being brought by climate change seemed so completely removed to the calculated scientific discourse of greenhouse gases and chemical compounds I associated with climate change at the time. I recall Constance Okollet, a farmer from Uganda who has since become a good friend, 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. For me, stories like Constance's transformed climate change from being a scientific issue to a human rights struggle.

The second principle I want to speak to is the importance of enabling people to participate in decision making. Climate justice is becoming a civil rights movement. At its heart are thriving communities whose resilience is based on transparent and accountable decision making in which all members of the community can participate. Participation lies at the heart of your work too. We must ensure that the voices of all people, particularly those living lives made vulnerable by social or economic marginalisation, are heard as we take decisions on climate change and sustainable development that will affect their lives.

This is particularly true for women who are all too often excluded from decision making processes that impact their lives. It seems obvious to me that ensuring that women are represented in decision making, that there is gender balance and that women have a voice, will lead to more robust and more impactful decisions – on any topic. But it is not, it seems, obvious to everyone, and we constantly need to remind those in power that there is a value in diversity and a value in bringing women to the table.

A 2015 study by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights found that ‘women continue to face significant discrimination in relation to their participation in public and political life in all geographical regions’. The reasons for this are multifaceted and complex and include economic, social and cultural issues, structural and social barriers and deeply entrenched gender roles and stereotypes.

Author and activist, Arundhati Roy, who articulated this exclusion in her acceptance speech for the Sydney Peace Prize, said something that resonates with me “we know, of course, there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” To many this is a confronting statement. But it is true nonetheless and something we have no choice but to confront.

Having a seat at the table and a forum to be heard in is the first step. But to achieve meaningful participation that participation needs to be adequately informed. Only with access to information can the people who are ‘preferably unheard’ participate in a meaningful way in climate decision making.

Climate actions must be developed in consultation with affected groups, placing particular emphasis on the need to ensure the informed and meaningful participation of people and groups living in vulnerable situations in decision making. Women are among those most vulnerable to climate change so their participation in decision making is a priority.

Add to this the valuable knowledge and experience they hold and there is no reason to leave them outside the room. Leaders must learn to listen to those living on the front lines of climate change and act accordingly. People like my friend Constance in Uganda, or Ursula Rakova, a courageous woman from a small atoll called the Carteret Islands near Papua New Guinea. Faced with rising sea levels and the threat of increasingly devastating storm surges from more frequent tropical storms, Ursula has endeavoured to organise her people and assist them in moving from their island atoll home to mainland Papua New Guinea, where they will be safer. But this means leaving their ancestral home behind and taking on the challenge of integrating into a new community and a new way of life.

Creating space for community leaders like Ursula and Constance in decision making on climate action ensures that locally held knowledge informs the design and implementation of responses to climate change. This not only brings about better outcomes for communities, it increases the chances that the community will feel a sense of ownership of the initiatives and so will be vested in successful outcomes.

Before concluding I would like to say a few words on the power of education in bringing about climate justice. I am glad that the International Association of Schools of Social Work are involved in this conference.

It is my strongly held belief that with the privilege of education comes a responsibility to find ways to apply the learnings for the betterment of humanity. In many regards, students drawn to study social work or social policy already intrinsically understand this responsibility and are answering its call. However as our societies evolve, so must our education systems. The magnitude of the task that confronts us in turning the tide on climate change and ensuring access to sustainable development for all people requires a new generation of graduates armed with the skill and expertise to take on this challenge.

Perhaps some of you are sitting here thinking, “This is all well and good, but my research has nothing to do with climate change...”. That could be true - but you may be surprised to discover that your expertise can contribute to the realisation of climate justice. My Foundation is guided by core principles - one of which highlights the transformative power of education for climate stewardship. When delivered in an effective multidisciplinary manner, education can increase consciousness of climate change and sustainable development and produce new insights not only at the scientific but also at the sociological and political level.

A practical first step would be for Schools of Social Work to advocate for the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals across social work and social policy teachings. This would help graduates to embark on their professional careers armed with a deepened understanding of the broader landscape in which they are operating.

By respecting human rights and ensuring transparency, accountability and participation, we can build trust in our systems and promote good governance. In the face of the uncertainty and anxiety facing our world today, these principles enable citizens to be informed and to contribute to solutions. This empowers them and makes them feel in control rather than anxious or fearful.

Now is the time, as the world faces one of the greatest transitions - away from fossil fuel powered, and inequitable, development to a new mode of inclusive sustainable development - to make all people part of the solution and not to alienate some of them due to perceptions that they are part of the problem. We need a just transition which cares about securing the future for former coal workers, for example.

At times of change and anxiety such as people around the world are experiencing now, the challenge is to get communities engaged, positively, for a better future, rather than to exclude them or let them withdraw. Being engaged is empowering.

Being empowered to engage is critical. When people are empowered they can demand dignity and defend their rights. But I'm not telling you anything new in this, this is your bread and butter. In your day to day work, in small and great ways, you help people to find their feet and their voice in this world.

All of you gathered here today are uniquely positioned to help with forging a pathway forward that is grounded in human rights, participation and empowerment.

By making the link between your efforts to develop inclusive and healthy societies and the global agendas to end inequality and reverse climate change, we see that without your actions, these agendas will be impossible to deliver.

So, as we read our newspapers, scroll through twitter and risk feeling like the world is about to tumble down around us – let’s not be afraid. Instead let’s draw strength from the realisation of our own agency, let us understand our capabilities to empower others and let us set about creating communities that allow people to be involved, empowered and free.

In discovering the truth of the power of solidarity within community, we tap into the essence of survival that those before us understood very well. Around the world, our histories, our cultures and even our languages bear evidence of the role that solidarity has played in shaping our societies. There is an old tradition of cooperation in Ireland where farmers turn to each other at times of harvest to lighten each other’s load. This system is known as a *Meitheal*. In Kenya, the national motto *Harambee*, translated as “all pull together” from Swahili, has similar origins in community collaboration.

This sentiment is echoed in the Sanskrit phrase Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam which translates to English as “the world is one family” and the South African word Ubuntu. My good friend Desmond Tutu described the latter as follows:

“A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”

Faced with the existential threat of climate change, we must draw on this essential core of human unity and come to understand that it will only be through working together, through participating in our communities and empowering our neighbours, that we will overcome.

Thank you.