

The great injustice of climate change

Cormac O'RaiFeartaigh

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Last month I attended a conference, Meeting the Challenge of [Climate Justice](#): From Evidence to Action, hosted by Trócaire and St Patrick's College, Maynooth. It was very interesting, not least because of its focus on the human rights aspect of climate change and the threat posed to the poorest people of the world.

This approach to the problem of global warming is very different to that of a physicist or climate scientist, but nonetheless valid. As the evidence mounts that the emission of [greenhouse gases](#) into the atmosphere is contributing to a gradual warming of the Earth and its oceans, the likely effects on the poorest and most vulnerable nations are a matter of increasing concern. Indeed, scientists are increasingly concerned that the warming might accelerate due to feedback effects such as the release of methane gas from the permafrost and the deep oceans, resulting in widespread hardship and migration as some regions become effectively uninhabitable due to persistent drought or rising sea levels.

Yet greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, despite a great deal of talk about reductions in the future. As noted on the conference website: "Climate change, and the [injustice](#) it represents, is one of the most serious challenges facing humanity. But while the evidence on human-made climate change is overwhelming, action to stem the rise in global temperatures lags far behind."

The conference opened with a keynote address by Mary Robinson. Few are more qualified to speak on the theme of the human rights aspects of climate change, given her former position as UN high commissioner for human rights and her current positions as UN Special Envoy on Climate Change and director of the Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice. Indeed, the address was notable for its emphasis on the human dimension; that is, on the moral imperative to share the burden of climate change and to safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable.

Global co-operation

I was also struck by Robinson's emphasis on difficulties in achieving global co-operation on the matter. This chimed with my own view that a significant slowing in carbon emissions will be difficult to achieve as long as each nation-state prioritises domestic economic interests over global concerns. Lack of meaningful action will most likely result in regional insecurities that will leave no nation untouched, including a refugee crisis of unprecedented scale.

Of course, it's important that such conferences are backed by science, and I particularly enjoyed a talk on the physics of climate change by Prof Jean-Pascale van Ypersele, vice-chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In his presentation, Ypersele described many of the measurements of global warming to date, from the monitoring of the surface temperature of land and sea to the temperature of the deep oceans, and from observations of the melting of land and sea ice to the detection of a slow rise in sea levels. This is important, as recent claims of a "hiatus in global warming" focused on surface temperatures alone, and have proved false.

Another speaker considered the reasons it has been so difficult to initiate efforts to counteract the warming. Bill McKibben, director of environmental group 350.org, assigned a great deal of blame to the captains of the fossil fuel industry, their deep pockets and their many lobbyists around the world. There is much truth to this, but one should not overlook the influence of political outlook and the ingrained resistance to any action on climate change that arises from a right-wing political viewpoint.

There were many other excellent contributions, with many speakers noting the difficulty faced by each country in achieving a reduction in carbon emissions without harming the national economy.

In Ireland's case, our recent Climate Bill contains no specific targets for a reduction in carbon emissions, while recent negotiations in Brussels offer the possibility that our agricultural sector might not be subject to the full rigour of EU restrictions on emissions. This seems reasonable for a country with a heavy dependence on agriculture, but it's hard to escape the conclusion that each nation continues to view the pressing global challenge of climate change through a lens of economic self-interest.

- **Dr Cormac O'RaiFeartaigh lectures in physics at [Waterford Institute of Technology](#) and is a Fellow of the [Royal Astronomical Society](#)**

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