

Speech by President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins: Desertification - Ireland's role in this global challenge

Áras an Uachtaráin, 26 March 2018

Dear Friends,

It is both a great pleasure and a great honour for me to welcome such distinguished guests to Áras an Uachtaráin this evening what is a most critical juncture in the history of our planet.

Ever since our ancestors, *Homo habilis*, emerged over 2 million years ago our species - characterised as we are by our capacity for co-operation, creation, and imagination – has sought to bend the world around us to fashion for ourselves the material basis for our distinct and diverse cultures. In doing so, many of the foundational and fundamental bases of our social lives have been transformed, and these transformations in turn have had ever greater effects on the Earth. The commencement of the current geological epoch, the Holocene, brought an end to long period of repeated glaciations that we often call the Ice Age.

These new conditions facilitated a radically different human culture, one based on the domestication of animals, the cultivation of the soil, and sometimes densely population urban centres. This Neolithic Revolution wrought a new relationship between humans and nature: the vast forests of the ancient world were gradually cleared to make way for agricultural production, altering landscapes, habitats and ecologies; men and women became workers of the land and tillers of the soil while others lived in urban centres created by agricultural surplus; and hierarchical social relations were forged to co-ordinate production and consumption in these societies.

These civilisations were powered by the muscle and sinew of humans and their domesticated animals, and for all the sophistication of ancient Mesopotamia, medieval Ethiopia or early modern Italy, they were constrained by nature, reliant ultimately for energy on plant life and the process of photosynthesis. The discovery of the ability to convert the energy released by the combustion of carbon into mechanical energy broke that constraint, and in doing so gave rise to a new relationship between economy, ecology and ethics, one that rested upon a narrow and distorted vision of political economy, and upon an imperialist ideology.

That ideology, creation of a philosophical thought that saw nature as something to be subdued, available for insatiable extraction and exploitation has brought a 4.5 billion year old planet to a point of extreme vulnerability. This has been achieved by a distortion of the contribution of science and technology. The promise of reason gave way under imperialism and colonisation to

the destruction of the natural world. An accommodating and widespread scholarship uncritically supported a view of endless growth, often indeed calling it 'development'.

The social and economic critiques produced during the Industrial Revolution are well known: indeed, they remain foundational for many social, economic and political movements today. Yet, perhaps less well-known outside the United States is the 1864 book *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, authored by the American diplomat George Perkins Marsh. Dismayed by the changes to the landscapes of his native New England that he had witnessed during his lifetime and informed by his studies of the ancient cultures of Southern Europe, Marsh wrote that nature was not an inexhaustible resource but that environmental degradation, soil erosion and deforestation could bring an end to modern civilisation much as it had to the civilisations of the ancient Mediterranean.

Man and Nature was published 150 years ago: there is now a far greater popular and scientific understanding of the influence that human civilisation, through its actions, exerts upon the planetary biosphere and ecosystem, and upon the potential for this influence to cause environmental calamities no less ruinous than those that befell previous human cultures.

The Nobel Prize winning atmospheric chemist, Paul Crutzen, has argued that we should recognise the age in which we now live as a new epoch in world history – the Anthropocene – such is the qualitative change in the relationship between a single species – our own – and the global environment. The term was first proposed by the Italian geologist and priest, Father Antonio Stoppani, in 1873.

We know all too well the catastrophic effects of anthropogenic climate change and the massive disruptions to the carbon cycle produced by the emission of greenhouse gases, and their growing accumulation in the atmosphere. Human activity has also significantly altered the nitrogen, phosphorus and sulphur cycles, which are so important to life on this planet.

The terrestrial water cycle, so vital to agriculture – particularly in areas of rainfed agriculture such as the Sahel – has been modified by deforestation and disruptions to river systems. Many scientists argue that we are now in the midst of the sixth great mass extinction such is the sudden loss in biodiversity that may occur in this century.

Dear friends,

The challenges of living in this age of the Anthropocene cannot be met by our continuing in the grip of old and tired orthodoxies, or by our being constrained by an economic philosophy which would separate our engagement and activity in economic life from our culture and society or from the natural world. We shall need new ideas, and we must advocate and fight for them intellectually and practically, invoking the enduring human values of compassion, solidarity and friendship, that are capable of addressing those inequalities of wealth, power and income which so often lie at the heart of the dysfunctional relationship between economic activity and the ecosystem.

Donal Dorr, one of the authors of *Laudato Si: An Irish Response* wrote in his contribution of the fundamental connectedness of our world:

'It is because everything in our universe has its origins in the Big Bang which took place 13,750,000 years ago. The incredible explosion of energy gave rise, after a billion years, to the formation of hundred million galaxies. The galaxy in which our world exists is called the Milky Way; it contains billions of stars. In our galaxy, about 4,600,000 years after the initial Big Bang, exploding stars dissolved into dust. Some of this dust, in turn, coalesced into other stars, one of which is our own sun. Some of the remaining cosmic dust formed the planets, including planet earth. In this world, which is our home, there emerged, over billions of years, the seas, the land, and the air. Much later came the water-creatures, the plants, the animals and eventually the various branches of humanity. Every rock, tree, animal and person all have a common origin; all are composed of the same cosmic material (which some people call 'star stuff'), and are all related to each other.'

I believe that the global community can draw inspiration from Pope Francis, who has, throughout his pontificate, offered words of hope and inspiration in times when they are desperately needed. It is great honour to be joined by a representative of the Holy See, His Excellency, the Most Reverend Archbishop Okolo, today, and may I express how much I, as Uachtarán na hÉireann, look forward to welcoming Pope Francis to Ireland this August.

Last January, I had the opportunity to meet all of the contributors to the volume to which I have already made reference, '*Laudato Si': An Irish Response*'. It is a collection of essays edited by Father Sean McDonagh – a powerful champion for ecological justice – containing the reflections of Irish theologians, academics, and environmentalists on that wonderful second encyclical of Pope Francis, which bears the subtitle '*On Care for Our Common Home*'.

Their visit and their book were another reminder of the vital moral intervention that *Laudato Si* represents as a call for both global social and environmental justice, and for a 'new and universal solidarity' in the face of interrelated threats which constitute nothing less than an 'ecological crisis'. Above all, Pope Francis reminded us that it is only by recognising that pollution, climate change, the loss of biodiversity, desertification, the growing scarcity of fresh water, global social and economic inequalities are all part a single complex and interconnected system, one that we can and must come to understand and to change.

These great global challenges cannot be met alone by any one country or group of countries. They require international co-operation and global solutions. So I am so very pleased that we are joined today by the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Ms Monique Barbut.

The Convention stands with the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change as expressions of practical global solidarity, representing as they do not only the three great achievements of the Rio Earth Summit of 1992,

but the primary vehicles through which we will organise our efforts to confront the threats that face humanity in the Anthropocene.

More than any other place on Earth, the continent of Africa is now the crucible for the global challenges that we confront. It is bearing and will continue to bear the greatest consequences of climate change. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs has estimated that by 2050, the continent will contain 2.5 billion people, 1 billion of whom will be young people. By mid-century then, Africa will be the continent of the young, with nearly forty percent of the young people on this planet – it promises to be a continent of promise and opportunity, one that will carry so many of the hopes and the dreams of our shared planet.

This growing population will require food, water, energy and shelter and all the mental and material resources required to lead a fulfilling life. In Africa, these needs must be met on a continent in which 46% of the land is now affected by land degradation and where, as a result, the livelihoods of nearly 65% of the people are jeopardised. This is nowhere more critical than the Sahel Region, home to over 100 million people, and the area most vulnerable to desertification and the gradual encroachment of the Sahara. By 2050, the Sahel is projected to be home to over 340 million people.

Like many of the environmental processes in the Anthropocene, land degradation is man-made. Over-grazing, de-forestation, unsustainable agricultural practices – these are all a result of human activities. In many countries in the Global North, these are driven by short-term profit, authorised by an inadequate and insufficient economic model. In arid drylands such as the Sahel, people are reliant on a highly variable and intermittent resource base, and so often unsustainable practices are not driven by, as in the Global North, greed, but by the necessity to survive.

As we recalled this International Women's Day, the burden of survival is borne, above all, by rural women. They are the backbone of the agricultural labour force, and in sub-Saharan Africa, over 60 per cent of all working women are employed in agriculture, often working long hours with no formal contracts or legal protection. In addition to formal work, women carry out many household tasks, including the collection of wood and water. In the dryland conditions of the Sahel, this becomes a far more difficult task, as resources have dwindled and deforestation become more pervasive.

We should not despair. The Convention to Combat Desertification has shown that land degradation can be combatted through new land management practices, equitable land tenure arrangements, and re-afforestation programmes. The nations of the world, including Ireland, have pledged, through the Sustainable Development Goals, to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil – including land affected by desertification, drought and floods – and to strive to achieve a land degradation neutral world by 2030.

This is an ambitious goal – and it has found an initiative equal in its ambition and in its audacity in the proposed establishment of the Great Green Wall, a zone of land restoration running over

7,775 kilometres from Dakar to Djibouti. In its breadth of vision, and in its promise of uniting African nations behind a single transformative continental enterprise, it is most characteristic of Thomas Sankara, who, as President of Burkina Faso in the 1980s, did so much to plant the idea in the minds of the continent. Under the leadership of the African Union Commission and the Pan African Agency of the Great Green Wall the Wall now brings together so many of the nations of Africa in this common endeavour.

The project now encompasses a range of potentially transformative national and pan-African projects, including re-afforestation, climate adaptation, sustainable soil and water management, support for communities in drylands, capacity building and technology transfer. Innovative initiatives include payment to communities for ecosystem services and participatory management plans for forests. With its capacity to unite nations and communities in solidarity, the Great Green Wall represents the best of the kind of international co-operation that will be required in this century.

I was so pleased when Don Mullan told me that the Society of African Missions is integrating the Great Green Wall into its Laudato Tree project, an extension of the wonderful Thumbprint Campaign for Climate Justice, which is already bringing the message of climate justice into schools, parishes and communities across Ireland.

Ireland shares so much with the nations of Africa: a long and unremitting struggle for independence and the challenges of creating a nation-state capable of fulfilling the potential and promise of our independence. We share also a contemporary experience of land degradation and sustainability in land-use. I am sure that Coillte, the Irish state forestry company, can recount the lessons of planting non-native woodland on inappropriate marginal soils. Indeed, as a former Minister with responsibility for our natural heritage I saw first-hand the difficulty of persuading people of the importance of biodiversity and of the many services provided by our ecosystems, none of which are taken account in our present understanding of economics.

This shared experience has given rise to a special solidarity, one that has reached its highest expression in the work of the Society of African Missions and the Missionary Sisters of our Lady of Apostles. In Laudato Si, Pope Francis wrote that:

‘In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.’

For many years, Irish women and men from the OLA and SMA have answered this call, and may I say to you today that your compassion, hope and courage has been truly exemplary. Most of you have committed your lives to standing in solidarity with communities across the developing world. With them, you have built schools and clinics, and you have planted trees. You have helped the most vulnerable within those societies and stood with them against injustice and

oppression. Many of you have lived within communities in the Sahel Region and in other areas facing similar challenges and have supported them in their efforts to withstand and adapt to the changes that we now speak about.

Mar Uachtaran na hÉireann, as President of Ireland, I would like to acknowledge the enormous contribution you have made in your careers. You have been wonderful ambassadors for Ireland and for your faith. By your actions you have humbled us, and by your words you now draw the attention of our country to climate justice.

You understand far better than most how the structures we have created at a global level can impact on people living a precarious existence. How changing climate patterns and reducing yields due to soil degradation can be catastrophic. You are well placed to help teach us, in Ireland, of why this matters to us and how we can act to help.

I am delighted that we have also been joined by representatives from environmental and development NGOs and from voluntary and State organisations who all have a part to play in Ireland's response to the interlinked global challenges we now face. It is heartening to hear of new partnerships that are now emerging between the UN, our Government, faith-based organisations, State bodies and civil society. To effectively address the enormous challenges we face, this simply must be the way of the future.

For we are one global family: we must recognise that the problems faced by a farmer in Niger are our problems; that the struggles of women in Mali to live decently are our struggles; that the hunger of a child in the Sudan is our hunger; and that we owe to each other a imprescriptible ethical duty to act to overturn injustice and put in its place an economic and social order capable of meeting the needs of all our peoples, without imperilling the natural systems on which we all, ultimately, depend.

Some years ago, in 2004 in fact, I had intimations very similar to the words of Donal Dorr in his contribution to 'Laudato Si: An Irish Response' – may I finish with my poem 'Stardust' from my collection, 'An Arid Season':

It is of stardust we are
Moulded by vapours and fragments
From the making and breaking of galaxies.
We are the broken bits of our cosmos
Moved by traces of embedded memory,
Of hopes unrealised and fading.
The promise of our as yet uncreated wholeness remains,
However weak.

From this flux we take refuge
In the cell of reason.
From that prison of categories

Our cry is heard
That we are not solely the children of reason

We have glimpsed the land of the heart.
The turbulence of present times recedes.
The stirring of that which is beyond
Time and space reverberates.

Our wonder invites us to make a journey
To stand against the false certainties
Of lesser tasks and poorer versions.

Out of exile our words will make
A plaintive discourse
That echoes of lost prophecy.
Deep within we hear it call,
Offering more than a refuge,
Making a fresh story of a new time
And wondrous space,
A promise of the as yet uncreated joy,
Make out of stardust.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.