Breakfast Debate on Climate Change & Human Rights, co-hosted by the Permanent Mission of Costa Rica to the UN in Geneva & the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, on March 5th 2015

Statement by Ms. Mary Robinson, President of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice & UN Special Envoy for Climate Change

(TRANSCRIPT)

It is good to see so many people turning out quite early in the morning. I don’t always remember that in Geneva. So, I am very pleased - particularly pleased to welcome Minister González, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Costa Rica; Mr. Ali, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh; and to acknowledge the two ambassadors who spoke before me who have become friends, Ambassador Elayne Gomez Whyte of Costa Rica - who is the co-host - and Ambassador Cecilia Rebong of the Philippines - who is the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum.

I have to actually correct you, Marc [Limon, executive-director of the Universal Rights Group / moderator of the event], and I do so with a certain humility. When I served here as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 until 2002, climate change was not in the front of my mind. I don’t remember making any significant speech about it. It was afterwards, when I was working on issues of health, and women, peace & security in co-responsibility with African countries that I became aware of how serious climate change already was in those vulnerable countries. I would meet people and they would say ‘oh, the things are so much worse’ and it is always about changes in climate. The rainy season is not coming in the same time and predictability in Liberia, long periods of drought and flash flooding in Uganda, the dry weather making things so much worse in the Horn of Africa – all over Africa! And I was very affected by that because I haven’t appreciated how bad the situation was and I came to realize that I am now from the belief that climate change is the biggest threat to human rights in our world today. And I am so glad that the Human Rights Council is giving it a full attention.

In preparation for this morning’s discussion, I re-read the second Male’ Declaration that herded the creation of the Climate Vulnerable Forum. In many ways, this declaration was ahead of its time. It spoke of the need for climate justice, and captures the commitment of vulnerable countries to act – even if not responsible for the cause of the problem - and their commitment to ambitious targets by carbon neutrality. It also highlights the connection between human rights and climate change, calling on parties to the UN Climate Convention to
address, and I quote, “the health, human rights and security implications of climate change, including the need to prepare communities for relocation, to protect persons displaced across borders due to climate change-related impacts, and the need to create a legal framework to protect the human rights of those left stateless as a result of climate change”. As you know this connection between human rights and climate change has been developed in resolutions of the Human Rights Council since 2008. These resolutions recognize the negative impacts of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights, in particular for those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations, pointing to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status and disability. They also point to the fact that human right obligations, standards and principles have the potential to inform and strengthen international, regional, and national policy-making in the area of climate change, promoting policy coherence, legitimacy and sustainable outcomes.

The challenge now is to ensure that the negative impacts of climate change on people’s rights prompt the global community to take urgent and ambitious action. And, when shaping this action and making it as inclusive and equitable as possible, we are guided by human rights obligations. The end result of this approach will be more effective climate actions. Speaking to you as representatives of the human rights community, I would like to share with you some of the outcomes of the Climate Justice Dialogue, which my foundation hosted with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, here in Geneva, just last month. The event brought members of the human rights and the climate change communities together – because, you remember, there was the ADP discussions here in Geneva. They were brought together to share experiences and information and to identify practical steps the communities could take to integrate human rights into climate action. In fact, some of the participants of that event are here this morning and I encourage you later to make your own reflections and share them. Some of the near-term actions suggested by participants includes the creation of fora under the UNFCCC and the Human Rights Council to allow the human rights and climate change communities to share examples and good practices.

I will recall here that the Geneva Pledge initiated by Ambassador Whyte and launched at the February session of the Climate Convention kick-started this with countries committing, and I quote from the pledge, “to a meaningful collaboration between our national representatives and these two processes to increase our understanding of how human rights obligations inform that climate action”. I believe the next step is to enable a similar collaboration and learning at the international level through workshops, seminars and panels like this one that is planned for tomorrow in the Human Rights Council.

The preparation of guides for climate actors on how to integrate human rights obligations, standards and principles into their work ... I was very conscious that the climate participants at that dialogue last month were open about their need for capacity-building and tools to enable them to better integrate human rights into their work. They called on the human rights community to assist them by sharing guidance examples and tool kits demonstrating how human rights can inform climate action.
Encouraging countries to examine the linkages between human rights and climate change when preparing their reports to the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, a study by my foundation found that 23% of country reports – this represents 45 countries – made explicit references to the human rights impacts of climate change in their submissions to the Universal Periodic Review since 2010. 23% ... we can approve on that, I think! The recent submission from the Republic of Kiribati demonstrates the potential of the UPR process to highlight both the risks climate change poses to human rights and the steps countries can take to ensure that their climate actions are informed by human rights.

I hope that our informal conversation this morning can share similar good practices and inspire us all to bring these examples into the panel discussions tomorrow. The panel discussions come at a critical time, when countries are actively preparing their national contributions, their INDCs, to the climate agreement to be adopted in Paris. And, as the negotiations on the climate intensify in the lead-up to COP 21 in Paris in December, a focus on human rights brings both urgency and discipline to our global response to climate change. The perspectives of the human rights community on climate change need to be heard. I really encourage you all to use this breakfast and tomorrow’s panel discussions to make your voices heard in this critical year for climate action, sustainable development and human rights. Thank you very much!