Address by

the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore T.D.

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Dublin Castle

09.50 approximately

(8 minutes)

Welcome

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Welcome to Dublin Castle. You are here for a ground-breaking dialogue on the linked challenges of Hunger, Nutrition and Climate Justice.
We have gathered here, from many different backgrounds, for one simple reason: we depend on each other, and we need to act together. We know that more effective action is needed to end the enduring scandal of global hunger. Under-nourished children will never reach their full potential. Climate change is already having a devastating impact on those who are suffering most. What is involved here is a matter of rights, of justice and equity, but also of practicality. Even at a time of economic difficulty, we do have available to us the resources and the tools to put an end to hunger and empower poor communities. But to do so we have to mobilise our political will and moral courage.

The human dimension of the challenge

This debate has to be truly transformative. And it can only be so if it is rooted in the reality of people’s lives today.
Think, for instance, of the life of a smallholder farmer in sub-Saharan Africa. The farmer is a woman – as are 80% of smallholder farmers in the region. She has young children. She wakes up early each morning with only one thought: to ensure her family’s survival.

She needs food, water and fuel. But they are in scarce supply in her village. The surrounding farms had been scorched by drought when the rains failed - again.

The science of climate change and the media debate about climate change seems a million miles from her homestead. She just knows that the impact of a changing climate is real in her life, and in the life of her village.

It can be counted in the maize that has withered on the stalks in her plot.

It is visible on the face of her baby daughter who is struggling to thrive, foreshadowing a future of wasted potential.
With only a limited supply of food and dependence on a single staple crop, how can she nourish and care for her children? How can she give them the chance to live, to grow and develop?

How will she access health services or education for her children when she has no surplus produce to sell at the market? How can she generate the energy, the spirit to dream of a better future?

This is a simple stark story, familiar to many of you who have travelled to join us here today. And it is a story with which I personally identify. I grew up on a small farm run by a woman … my mother. Our lives were governed by the weather – how prolonged rain could rot a field of hay, how bad autumn wind could lodge and destroy a field of corn, how a bad night of frost could kill a newborn lamb – and we were living in one of the most moderate climates in the world. So I can just imagine the challenge of climate for small holders in less forgiving climates.
Many of you could tell other stories – of pastoralists, herders, or fishing communities who are trying to cope, and of poor slum dwellers in huge cities expanding through economic growth but marked by growing inequalities.

The Challenge of Hunger-Nutrition-Climate Justice

We live in a world of plenty, but one which is reaching its environmental limits. And we are struggling to feed a rapidly growing population under a changing climate.

The effects of climate change on agriculture and the production of food represents only part of the picture.

We can easily overlook how climate change affects not just the quantity of food grown, but its quality and diversity. It directly contributes to undernutrition.

It also affects water, sanitation and health.
And, of course, climate change affects food prices and the affordability of food. High food prices hit the poor hardest. And they are often forced to cope by reducing the number of meals they provide to their families, or by buying cheaper but less nutritious foods.

So we are not just talking of the need to increase food production for a growing global population. It is essential to bring the hunger and climate agendas together and examine them through a broader lens – that of nutrition.

The challenge we face is immense. Together, we have made great progress over the past decade in fighting poverty and disease. But the lives of a billion people, one seventh of the population of the planet, are still dominated by poverty and hunger. As we sit here today, 870 million people in the world are hungry. That is almost twice the population of the entire European Union.
7,000 children under the age of five die every single day and the underlying cause is under-nutrition.

We face the problem of hunger anyway. But climate change accentuates it. And, although climate change threatens all countries, it is the world’s poorest and most vulnerable that suffer most and can cope least. And they are the people who have contributed least to its cause.

This is an injustice, pure and simple. It is morally wrong that the poorest in the world pay in some cases with their lives for the centrally-heated and air-conditioned comfort of the better off. It is not sustainable in a world more interconnected than at any other time in history. It must be addressed – for reasons of morality and of self-interest. Because in our world today, the common interest is our self-interest.
Ireland’s Role

That is why Ireland will continue to play its part, as we have always done, in good times and in bad.

We are a small country whose history knows of hunger. And that was never more clear than when famine devastated our island. It is no exaggeration to state that a defining element of our national experience remains the collective memory of what became known as the Great Hunger of the 1840s.

Then, Ireland had a fast-growing population of 8 million people. Small subsistence farmers were dependent on one crop, the potato. When weather contributed to blight and the failure of that crop, the poor had no personal or political capacity to cope. More than one million people died of starvation and over one million more were forced to emigrate.

This was a catastrophe that blighted whole generations; at times, unspeakable – it’s bones, the empty, crumbling homes and
villages to which no one would ever return. It was a scourge which shaped many of the issues we face as a nation to this day. And, to a great extent, it shapes our understanding of the need to prioritise hunger and nutrition in the fight to end global poverty, and to empower poor societies to lead their own development.

We are a small country and our resources are limited. But we are maintaining our development programme. We are devoting over 20% of our funding to the fight to end hunger. We will be one of the first countries in the European Union to enshrine our climate change targets in domestic law. And, through our foreign policy, we want to give voice to those who to date have had no voice in encouraging and influencing the international community to end extreme hunger and poverty in a generation.

**Leadership on Nutrition**

We have seen the importance of leadership in recent years, for instance through the international Scaling Up Nutrition Movement.
I am proud that Ireland has been an active leader, especially in focusing on nutrition in the vital first 1,000 Days, when progress missed in a baby’s life can never be retrieved.

But we know that our efforts to target chronic under-nutrition in babies and mothers during the first one thousand days of life will be undermined if we do not build in complementary action on the effects of climate change. What is the point of spending millions on micronutrient supplements for pregnant women, mothers and babies in vulnerable communities, if we don’t also address their suffering from constant diarrhoea, from drinking dirty water contaminated by flooding?

We know that climate change makes poor people vulnerable, and that we have to address hunger, nutrition and climate more coherently. Through Irish Aid we have begun to do so, and I am delighted to have our partners from communities in Malawi, Ethiopia and Lesotho here to share these experiences with us. Here in Ireland, we are taking a lead by developing climate change legislation, to plan for a reduction in our own carbon
footprint. And we are prioritising this coherence challenge in our current six-month EU Presidency.

A new global framework for international development

Our Presidency has come at a pivotal moment in international development, as we approach the target date for the Millennium Development Goals, and policy discussions begin on the global agenda post-2015.

We know that we need a new set of goals and a more coherent framework for sustainable development and the eradication of poverty and hunger. This is a huge challenge for governments and policy makers worldwide. But it is essential that the voices of the people most impoverished and marginalised are amplified and heard in the policy making process. Their experiences and views are critical to the elaboration of any new policy framework for the elimination of poverty at a time of environmental uncertainty.
Our gathering in Dublin is designed to give impetus to this process. We are honoured that just over a third of the participants here today are representatives of local communities and organisations from 32 developing countries across Africa, Asia, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. You must be the heart of our dialogue. We need to listen to you and learn from your communities’ experiences of what works and what doesn’t. We want the policy makers here to understand what you need and how you see your children’s – all our children’s – futures. Your messages need to go directly from this hall into the United Nations negotiations on the new framework for global development.

Conclusion

Any credible new framework for global development must be based on those needs and rights and on an understanding of what is achievable.
In the fight to eliminate poverty and hunger, I want to keep before me the needs and rights of the smallholder farmer in Africa. She must be empowered. She must have access to advice and assistance from her local farmer support group. She can see rapid change through simple interventions, which research and practice have shown to work. For instance, the planting of legumes and nitrogen-fixing trees along with maize in her field will improve soil fertility and, in turn, increase her maize yields.

If she can grow enough maize and protein-rich legumes to feed her family, she can contemplate selling the surplus at the market, giving her additional income, opening up access to more nutritious food, vegetables and fruit. And time to care for and breastfeed her young infant. That child will have a realistic prospect of healthcare and education. And at that point, transformation at the household and community level becomes a transformation of the imagination, opening up the opportunity for societal and global change. When political empowerment and the realisation of rights become, first, possible and, then, an imperative. Or in the words of one of the founder of my political
party, that our children shall have bread, but they shall have roses too.

Our challenge today is to place the voices and experiences of those directly affected, right at the centre of global development. Because we recognise that we live in one world, and that we need to make the choice to forge together one future. I look forward to participating with you in this work.

ENDS