

**The Role of Philanthropy in Tomorrow's Ireland**  
**2010 Ray Murphy Lecture**  
**As Delivered by Former President of Ireland Mary Robinson**

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National Gallery of Ireland

I am pleased to have been invited to give this year's lecture in the series in memory of Ray Murphy. I can think of no more fitting tribute to a distinguished contributor to the philanthropic community than to remember him by examining and discussing what philanthropy means and how it can contribute to the human condition.

As the title suggests, the theme of what I have to say has to do with looking forward, looking forward to Ireland in the years ahead and the part that philanthropy can play in our future.

I feel it is right that we should look forward because a great deal of time is being spent in dissecting our recent past and asking ourselves what went wrong.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am not one of those who would like to see a veil drawn over events of the past. I agree with the philosopher George Santayana: those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. We could fail to learn from our mistakes and fall into the same traps again.

But, on the other side, there is the risk that we could dwell so much on the past that we find ourselves paralysed into inaction.

We must find a way to steer our course between these two dangers, as Odysseus and his sailors did when they had to sail through the perilous rocks of Scylla and Charybdis.

In a speech I gave last summer at Beal na Blath, I asked how we should see ourselves in twenty, or thirty years? What kind of society do we hope our children and grandchildren might enjoy?

The speech had a resonance that surprised me: the many messages I received from the public made it clear that there is a yearning among people for a clear way forward.

The story of the Celtic Tiger is one that will no doubt be discussed for years to come – and taught probably in Economics lectures as a salutary example! It will likely be said that Ireland was regarded as having made remarkable progress over a fifteen year period but that the economic model that had been followed was seriously flawed. The property bubble, the problems with the banks and our decline in competitiveness have shaken the pillars of our success to their foundations and have had negative impacts that everyone in Ireland is experiencing in one way or another.

Concern is not confined to this island: as I travel I find that Irish people abroad are deeply worried about what the future holds for Ireland.

What can be rescued from what looks like a very bleak picture?

I make no claim to having the solution to the very serious problems we face in Ireland. But I would like to share my thoughts about some areas where I think we could make important progress.

We certainly face enormous challenges, arguably the toughest since the State came into being.

My view is that seismic challenges of such magnitude require not only corrective solutions but leadership and a vision of the sort of society we hope will emerge from the crisis. I welcome the fact that there is more and more public debate about this. It springs from the realisation that the way we have been ordering our affairs was not in the country's best interests and must be changed.

The principle of equity should be central to any vision of the future. Everyone is aware of the statistics, confirmed in successive UN Human Development Reports, which show the gap between rich and poor in Ireland as much greater than in most other developed countries. We know, too, that those likely to suffer most during this crisis are not those at the top but the poorest and most vulnerable.

I feel that whatever plans and measures are taken to put the economy back on track, they must take account of this fundamental injustice and make the closing of the gap between rich and poor a primary objective.

I have also argued that funding for education should not be reduced. Even at a time where painful decisions on cuts have to be made, we must protect the quality of our education and the goal of access for all to education. Education is the key to strengthening innovation and skills at all levels. That, in turn, is vital to create sustainable employment.

On the positive side, a number of encouraging developments took place during Ireland's years of success. Three in particular stand out for me:

First, the strong growth in Irish philanthropic initiatives over recent decades. This audience will be familiar with many of these. Perhaps the best known are Chuck Feeney's Atlantic Philanthropies and the long established Ireland Funds.

And there are countless further instances which are less well known, where Irish people have decided to fund worthy causes at home and abroad on a long term basis.

Second, the growing sense of Ireland as a member of the global community, in particular as a bridge between the rich north and the poor south. This has been exemplified in many ways: through the focus of much philanthropic work on the developing countries, through the unceasing help which people give to non-governmental organisation such as Concern, Goal and Trocaire and so many others; through the work of charities such as the Chernobyl Children, through support for human rights defenders organisations such as Amnesty and Frontline and through public support for increases in the Government's Official Development Assistance, Irish Aid.

It is truly heartening that at a time of prosperity that generous impulse to help others, which has always been characteristic of Ireland, remained so strong. The most recent example was the

public response to the earthquake in Haiti when millions of Euros were donated within weeks of the disaster. Ireland has come closer than ever before to meeting the pledges we have been making to assist the developing world. The Irish diaspora, too, are coming forward with innovative ideas for Ireland.

And let us not forget that Ireland can act as a bridge in other ways too – as exemplified by our role in the Special Olympics.

Third, the recognition that Ireland will have to be creative and innovative if we are to regain our competitiveness. The model on which our economic growth was based has to change. Tax rates served us well in attracting foreign direct investment but that will not be sufficient for future growth. We have to find new ways to ensure that Ireland remains a country where businesses will want to base themselves and where our young people can find sustainable employment.

Philanthropy, global solidarity, innovation. I see great potential for synergy between these three positive elements. Together, in my view, they have the capacity to regenerate and reinvigorate. But this will not happen unless we take the necessary steps to capitalise on our advantages.

Philanthropy can play a catalytic role.

What distinguishes philanthropy from other charitable efforts is that it takes a long term view and envisages a long term engagement.

We can see this if we look back to the contribution of Andrew Carnegie, one of the greatest philanthropists, whose approach has influenced all who came after him. Carnegie concentrated on spreading literacy; his libraries in Ireland and Britain and elsewhere brought learning to generations of readers, the effects of which can still be felt, more than a hundred years later, even in our electronic age.

In the same way, Atlantic Philanthropies have been supporting a wide range of long term programmes to help the elderly and young people, to improve healthcare and to promote reconciliation and human rights, for almost 30 years. This work has seen over a billion dollars spent throughout the island of Ireland. But the activities of Atlantic Philanthropies extend much further – to Chuck Keeney’s native America, to Australia, Vietnam, South Africa.

The grantees are chosen with a firm eye on sustainability with the aim of making a lasting impact to improve people’s lives.

This is also true of the work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which has recently pledged some €30 million to help Concern in the fight against infant and maternal mortality.

But in mentioning these examples I must stress that while we have become used to thinking of philanthropic organisations as relatively large scale operations with multi million euro, or dollar, budgets it is not necessarily so. We can all be philanthropists, and arguably should be, taking a long term view and with a commitment to a long term engagement.

Let me mention Islands First which is a very small NGO with modest resources but a huge sense of determination and imagination. Its mission is to help the Small Island States become

effective and vocal advocates for environmental change within the UN where they represent some 25% of the membership. Islands First work by building the capacity of the individual UN missions of the Small Island States to influence environmental policy. It is not an NGO seeking to impose a Western sense of environmentalism; rather it was originated at the request of several small island states with the goal of increasing their ability to advocate on their own behalf and cooperate more effectively with the scientific and environmental communities. Islands First modus operandi is as simple as attracting young lawyers to work in and with the UN missions to build capacity. Their way of doing is critical and is proving to be very effective.

Whatever their size and reach philanthropists are far seeing and courageous. They are not daunted by the scale of the challenges and they know that results will not emerge overnight.

Philanthropy has existed for many years and has evolved to the stage where it is subject to scrutiny and academic research. The relationship with government, accountability, legitimacy, the long term impact of philanthropic endeavour - all of these aspects are under discussion. This reflects the important role philanthropy can play in our society - and a recent development indicates how Governments can in turn play an important role in encouraging philanthropy, Earlier this year Gordon Browne appointed Dame Stephanie Shirley as Britain's Ambassador for Philanthropy. And she has done the modern-day equivalent of hitting the ground running. She has launched a very imaginative website which I would commend to you all; it gives philanthropists a voice - letting them tell their stories in an unmediated way.

Philanthropy can be seen as supplementing the role of governments in the redistribution of resources from those who have to those in need. Of course, philanthropic funding will never represent more than a small percentage of what governments fund. But it has the power to make a major impact nonetheless, not least by demonstrating to government the merit of new approaches.

And philanthropic funding can provide society with a capacity for taking risk that goes beyond the limits of states or markets. The risk dimension is especially important where research and development are concerned. Failures in research outnumber successes by a considerable factor. Philanthropic funding creates the space for innovative research which hopefully will stand the test of the long road from a good idea to successful application.

Modern studies emphasise the value of a strategic approach to philanthropy. As Hal Harvey and Paul Brest of the Hewlett Foundation put it in their book Money Well Spent:

“Philanthropy comes from the heart, from the love of humankind. It is love or passion that leads philanthropists to determine their missions and set ambitious goals. But, once you have determined these goals, the process becomes outcome-oriented. At this point, mind and muscle come in to design and implement a strategy to achieve these goals.”

I will come back to the role that philanthropy can play as I have proposals to make about core funding and collaboration. I would like now to focus on one instance where I believe that the synergy between philanthropy, global solidarity and innovation can be effective.

What is the greatest challenge facing the world today? For many, the answer would be the faults which have emerged in the banking system and the risk of economic stagnation. Others might say the nuclear threat, the persistence of poverty and hunger or the lack of proper healthcare for so many in the world.

These are indeed formidable challenges. But there is a greater challenge which we all face and that is the rapid change in the earth's atmosphere as a result of carbon emissions.

If I had been addressing you six months ago, I would not have needed to make the case about the dangers we face from global warming unless corrective action is taken as a matter of urgency. Unfortunately, the outcome of the Copenhagen summit, which most people found disappointing, as well as some relatively minor inaccuracies in the scientific data, have been exploited by those who refuse to acknowledge the scale of the problem. They have been seized on, too, by countries which balk at the cost of changing our profligate ways to argue that the situation is not as bad as claimed.

The truth is: the climate situation is very grave. It is an immediate and present danger. If we do not meet the target of keeping temperature rises below the 2 degrees Celsius target our future is bleak. As Al Gore put it in a recent article, "scientific enterprise will never be completely free of mistakes. What is important is that the overwhelming consensus on global warming remains unchanged". He predicts, as do the vast majority of scientists who are experts in the field, that what we face is an unimaginable calamity for human civilisation as we know it unless large scale preventive measures are taken without delay.

It is true that the steps which are needed are costly and require changes in all our behaviour. The target for greenhouse gas emissions varies but is in general of the order for a reduction of 40% by 2020 – that is only 10 years from now – and of 80% by 2050.

The cost is in the billions. But what is the alternative? We cannot turn away from the predicament we find ourselves in and hope it will go away. It is, I believe, the greatest human rights challenge facing the world and I have made no secret of the fact that I will focus on it when I return to Ireland later this year.

As in so many areas, it is the poorest countries that stand to lose most from climate change. In Ireland we think in terms of the threat to our coasts and to aspects of our agriculture and industry. Think of the impact already on countries like the small island states in the Pacific and Indian Ocean which risk being wiped out completely, countries such as Bangladesh which are extremely vulnerable to climate change. Think of the impact on countries where water is a precious commodity under threat and agriculture is more precarious than ever thanks to increasing droughts, floods and other extreme weather conditions.

It is doubly unjust that the poorest countries should suffer more than those who benefited most from carbon-based growth.

This is where global solidarity comes in. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims the equality of all human beings. The Right to Development has been recognised by the UN. It follows that the benefits and burdens associated with climate change must be fairly allocated

among all of us on this planet. Those who have benefitted and still benefit from emissions in the form of economic development and wealth are mainly the industrialised countries. They have an ethical obligation to share benefits with those who suffer from the effects of these emissions, mainly vulnerable people in developing countries.

There is a growing recognition that climate change is more than an environmental issue: it is a matter of global justice and equity. Civil society and the non-governmental organisations have been the first to recognise this. As Jessica Ayers and Saleemul Huq of the **International Institute for Environment and Development** (IIED) have put it:

“Climate change is washing away progress made in poverty reduction and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. It is crucial that we address climate change from a people centred and development perspective.”

The term used to describe this is Climate Justice. I used it myself for the first time in December 2006 when I delivered the first Barbara Ward Lecture on Climate Change and Justice. Climate Justice is now very much on the agenda. It builds on the concepts of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities which are spelled out in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. It begins with the acknowledgement that because the world’s richest countries have contributed most to the problem, they have a greater obligation to take action and to do so more quickly.

Climate Justice requires analysis and action that builds on the differential impacts on specific groups, including women and indigenous peoples. It reinforces the need for governments and others to act in an accountable and transparent manner that respects the human rights and dignity of all people – reducing risks to vulnerable populations to a minimum, and allowing no one to fall below a minimum threshold because of climate change impacts.

Why do I believe that Climate Justice is an area where Ireland can play a special role?

For a start, we come with excellent credentials. I have mentioned our enviable record in development through the scale of official aid which in 2008 put us in sixth place in the world in terms of disbursements on a per capita basis. Our volunteers have followed in the path of our missionaries in bringing essential skills to poor countries. And we have a justified reputation for quality delivery of aid by our NGOs and advocates such as Bono and Bob Geldof.

Every time I travel to the developing world I see praiseworthy examples of Ireland’s assistance, by our NGOs and volunteers and by Irish Aid. I admire the attention to grassroots concerns, to local ownership and sustainability. My only regret is that funding for such work should be the first to suffer when cuts are being made. Yes, Ireland faces a very difficult financial situation – possibly the worst we have ever faced – but the corrections we make should not be at the expense of the most vulnerable. I hope that the cuts in the overseas aid budget will be the last and that ODA will not be seen as a soft option.

And we must be sure that development interventions meet the changing needs of a planet which is using up its energy credits at a disastrous speed. I recall a project I visited in Zambia, not funded by Ireland but by the World Bank, where wells had been drilled to provide much needed

water but, because the technology used was unsuitable, the equipment was lying there rusty and unused.

I am confident that we can lead the way in adapting our development actions, governmental and philanthropic, to the challenges we face today. When we look back on the history of Ireland's relations with the developing world, we can see that Ireland reinvented itself from the days of our huge missionary presence into the range of effective development organisations and workers who are engaged today. Similarly, I believe that we can re-orientate our aid to take account of the threat of global warming.

A good start would be to insist that funding of climate change measures should be additional to funding for development. It should be new money and not a substitute for existing programmes.

But we can do more. A key feature of Climate Justice is that the poor countries must have access to the new green technologies which will cut emissions. Sharing these new technologies is a vital element of Climate Justice.

This is something which could benefit Ireland both nationally and in our role as bridge between rich and poor.

We are an adaptable people with a capacity to be innovative and to think and work in fresh ways. I believe that we can apply this capacity to innovative approaches to reducing carbon emissions. A lot is happening in research and development on green technologies in our third level institutions. This is one area where business and environmentalist have common ground as both see the value of Ireland becoming a leader in the green economy.

There is a growing consensus on the need for innovation as the key to economic recovery.

But innovation has to be more than a slogan. The report of the Innovation Ireland Taskforce recognises that Ireland has had success in attracting research and development to our industry and campuses but it points out that for Ireland to become a major European innovation hub a range of measures must be put in place. The Report emphasises in particular the need for substantial funding for research and development, better collaboration between the various stakeholders including business, the academic institutions and government, and rewards and incentives for new thinking.

Philanthropists have a role to play in this. The example of Climate Justice which I have focused on is just one of many where the combination of the philanthropists' clout and the talents of skilled graduates can be a powerful force. A good example is Silicon Valley where philanthropic funding is being made available for innovative start-ups. Many of these start-ups will fail but many others are succeeding in revitalising Silicon Valley's fortunes.

I believe that this model of collaborative effort between philanthropists and our highly skilled graduates can work for Ireland too. Support for innovative start-ups, including social entrepreneurship, can play a vital role in making Ireland a smart economy.

Research is expensive and, for reasons we are all too aware of, financing is particularly hard to find at present. Philanthropists can intensify support for research and development. And they can reward and incentivise new thinking. If we consider the work of one of the oldest philanthropic Foundations, the Nobel Foundation, we will see what a powerful impact philanthropy can have.

There is enormous scope for our philanthropists to collaborate with each other and with research centres and in general support catalytic networking to ensure added value and foster social justice and entrepreneurship. Transparency and accountability are correctly demanded from grantees but an integral part of support from philanthropists must be the provision of operational as well as project funding. The constant complaint is that Foundations are happy to support projects but not the core capacity to establish and sustain them. I would urge that a focus on core operational costs is a must for all philanthropists to address not least in this year, 2010, which is a special year.

It is hardly surprising if the primary focus of our attention is on our grave domestic problems. Like everyone else, my profound hope is that this year will see a bottoming out of Ireland's economic and fiscal problems and a return to positive trends.

But there is a bigger picture. 2010 is also a vital year for other reasons. This year sees the ten-year review of progress on achieving the Millennium Development Goals. There are bound to be disappointments in store, not least because of the impact of the world economic problems on the poorest countries, a story we hear very little about. But there is still time to renew our efforts to achieve the MDGs by the target date of 2015.

Philanthropy, global solidarity, innovation. These are forces which can form a major dynamic in economic recovery. Everyone who can contribute should do so – academics, NGOs, the private sector, civil society and of course our philanthropists, all must play their part.

In conclusion let me refer to the ideals behind this series of lectures. In remembering Ray Murphy, Philanthropy Ireland aims to encourage philanthropic giving in Ireland through exposure to current trends in international philanthropy and to help position Ireland as a centre of philanthropic excellence. I would add that Ireland and Irish people should use that philanthropy to take the lead internationally in addressing key human rights issues affecting the poorest of the poor. We are uniquely positioned to do so.

Thank you.