

Opening Address

Kofi Annan

President of the Global Humanitarian Forum

Your Royal Highness Princess Haya,
President Ramos Horta,
President Anote Tong,
Minister Calmy-Rey,
Former President John Kufuor,
Members of the Foundation Board,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Can I start by welcoming you to Geneva and this very important conference.

Looking around the room, it is good to see so many people who attended the Global Humanitarian Forum's inaugural conference last year but also to welcome new faces here for the first time.

Your attendance and knowledge will inform our debates, help us draw up innovative and practical solutions - and enhance the authority and influence of our conclusions.

The extraordinary range of organisations and view points we represent has significantly increased global pressure for decisive action on climate change.

Thanks to your efforts and our collective voice, the concept of climate justice has been pushed right up the international agenda.

So has the need to take fully into account the impact of changing weather patterns on wider development and human rights issues.

We have also worked hard to fill in the gaps in information and to drive practical solutions, moving the debate from discussions about the abstract and the future to the devastating impact on people now.

As the agenda for the next two days shows, we are determined to step up these efforts.

We can look forward to a range of expert speakers, workshops and focus sessions on the issues at the heart of the human impact of climate change.

For we have, as we all know, no time to congratulate ourselves.

We are discussing the greatest environmental and humanitarian concern of our age.

Climate change is a grave and all-encompassing threat - to our health, our security, our prosperity and quality of life.

As a clutch of recent reports - including this month in the United States - have demonstrated, climate change is affecting every continent and accelerating faster than had previously been thought.

And it is having a catastrophic impact on the lives of millions of people as last month's report from the Forum underlined.



Commissioned by our conference last year, it tellingly brought together comprehensive evidence of the human impact of climate change.

The findings confirmed, what we have been saying from the start, that it is the poorest countries and poorest people who are, and will, suffer most.

This, of course, is the deep injustice at the heart of this crisis.

It is not just that climate change is going to hit hardest those who already face the biggest disadvantages and challenges.

It is that this additional burden falls on those who have also done least to cause it.

As the report spelt out, the 50 least developed nations of our world account together for just one per cent of greenhouse gases.

Yet it is these countries which will see the overwhelming destruction that climate change is causing and will continue to cause.

It is this injustice – as well as the urgency and scale of the crisis – which must be at the forefront of the minds of those with the responsibility for reaching agreement at Copenhagen later this year.

And this is another reason why this conference is both so important and timely.

We must send out a loud and clear message on the need to slow down and reverse climate change, to help its victims and to put the world on a path to sustainable development.

There must be deep, binding and fair targets to cut emissions of greenhouse gases.

Those developed economies most responsible for past and present emissions must take the lead.

Without them accepting responsibility, the rapidly developing economies will understandably resist the changes in their economies which are also needed.

The polluter-must-pay principle should be put into practice locally, nationally and internationally to help fund mitigation and adaptation measures.

This must include a transfer of additional resources, and technology to help developing countries protect their citizens and grow their economies sustainably.

I have no doubt of the difficulties which must be overcome to reach agreement in Copenhagen.

But I am equally in no doubt about the consequences if we fail.

The clock is ticking. Every year we delay, the greater the damage, the more extensive the human misery – and the higher the cost, pain and disruption of inevitable action later.

So this conference must provide a powerful voice for the millions of victims of climate change.

But we must also focus on the practical steps that can be taken to help them and our world meet these challenges.

For as well as putting pressure on the world's political leaders for agreement in Copenhagen, we also have to draw attention to new challenges climate change will bring, and how we will respond as organisations and individuals.



Challenges such as the immense extra demands that will be put on emergency aid and humanitarian resources by more frequent and severe storms, flooding and droughts.

One of the reasons that the human impact of climate change has not received proper attention is because the problem it exacerbates - such as poor health and poverty - have their roots elsewhere.

But as extreme weather events become more common, the resources and systems to tackle these disasters will be put under new and intolerable strain.

Over the next two days, we need to discuss how we respond to these pressures.

We will need to find extra resources and put in place better coordination and cooperation so we can provide the urgent help which will be needed.

We also must discuss how to give longer-term protection to those forced to leave their land and communities due to climate change.

This is already happening in many parts of the world as once productive land becomes desert or communities become even more susceptible to unpredictable and dangerous floods.

The number of displaced people (climate change refugees) is set to grow.

Their plight is as great – and more permanent – than those forced to flee conflict or persecution.

But they have no protection under international law. We must find ways of addressing this.

In the coming years and decades, climate change will be a major brake on development hopes.

We must focus on how we put risk reduction strategies at the heart of national – and international - development plans.

We also need to hammer out solutions to specific problems such as reducing the frightening rate of deforestation which is hastening climate change and how we provide affordable and green energy to communities in the developing world.

These are both areas where we need new partnerships and to make better use of the expertise, networks and resources that are available.

The Weather Info for All project, which the Forum has just launched, is an example of how the private and public sectors can work together to deliver real practical benefits.

As you will hear shortly, collecting accurate information about weather and climate across Africa will give farmers better guidance about when to plant and harvest crops as well as helping alert communities about severe storms.

There are, I believe, many other areas where such new and pioneering partnerships can make a big difference to people's lives.

This conference will explore where these opportunities are and how we can make sure they both happen and deliver on their goals.

Over the next two days, we have to help shape the response to the human impact of climate change at every level.

There is no doubt the challenges are immense and the penalty for failure stark.



But there are reasons for optimism as well.

There is now a consensus over what needs to be done and the urgency of our response.

And since the conference last year, two new factors have come into play.

A new President and new administration in the United States have demonstrated their seriousness about combating climate change.

Given that the US is the greatest source of emissions, this raises optimism for Copenhagen and beyond.

It is an administration which, together with every country, has been struggling with how to tackle the severest global recession for over 60 years.

While this economic meltdown has caused severe pain across the world, the extraordinary national and collective response also provides a way forward.

Many of the economic stimulus packages we have seen have placed a great emphasis on investment in low-carbon energy and new technologies to create jobs and boost sustainable development.

Indeed, we have the knowledge, the resources and the technology to reduce the pace of climate change and safeguard people and countries from its impact.

What is needed is the vision, courage and will to act.

It is easy to place all the responsibility on our political leaders.

And there is no doubt that the decisions they make at Copenhagen will help shape the world we leave to future generations.

But we must all accept our responsibilities as well – as leaders within our organisations but as individuals, parents, as consumers and citizens, too.

Over the next two days, we have the chance to discuss openly and honestly how we can make a difference.

To use our collective experience and expertise to point the way to the challenges that must be overcome but also to arrive at solutions.

We, too, must show vision and courage.

I believe this Forum is showing the way by bringing organisations and people together.

Over the last year, we have made a good start. But we can't and won't rest. There is too much at stake.

Thank you.

