Opinion & Analysis

Bad effects of our actions felt abroad must be accepted

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As we moan about the hassle of switching to low-energy light bulbs, only one in 12 Ugandans has access to electricity

The rain it raineth on the just and on the unjust fellow; but mostly on the just because the unjust steals the just's umbrella

A popular view of history is that our ancestors endured extreme hardships and political and economic inequality, giving way to a gradual rise in prosperity and freedoms that have delivered us the Ireland of today. Nama notwithstanding, who'd rather now be living in the Ireland of 1909, or for that matter, 1809?

Our history of course owes much to our geography. The ancient curse of being located adjacent to the rapacious British empire has transmuted into the coddling we now enjoy as members of one of the world's most exclusive clubs, the EU. Ireland had a narrow escape from its colonial past. Few other countries have been so fortunate.

Economic colonialism persists all over the world, but today it has been subtly repackaged as globalisation. The developed world employs rigged markets and cartels to extract resources on our terms. The unprecedented flood of cheap products we now enjoy is paid for by millions of farmers, child labourers and others in societies that are sinking ever deeper into poverty and ecological bankruptcy.

Three billion people now exist on less than two dollars a day; the last 100 years has seen the gulf between the world's rich and poor expand sharply. This is no coincidence. Like on a see-saw, as one side rises, so the other must fall.

On one level, the fact that McDonald's can afford to hand out electronic toys manufactured 10,000 miles away free with every €3.70 Happy Meal can be seen as a triumph of market economics and logistics. This is at best a facile analysis.

"When people do not pay for the consequences of their actions, we have market failure," according to the 2006 *Stern Review*. Our collective failure to put an economic price on the "externality" of climate-altering greenhouse gas emissions is, said Lord Stern, "the greatest market failure the world has seen".

The consequences of our affluent lifestyles and our actions can seem opaque, even remote, in a country of the relative wealth and benign climate of Ireland. They are, however, all too apparent to those on the sharp end of the poverty wedge, where climate change is a crushing daily reality.

The billions of tons of carbon that humanity has dumped into the atmosphere over the last two centuries are now wreaking havoc upon the very regions that contributed little to this planetary pollution and are least able to afford to shield their populations from its effects. Our "polluter profits" regime is perhaps the most egregious injustice ever visited by the powerful upon the weak.

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A new movement, known as climate justice, is now developing to address these profound challenges. In a space frequently infested by rock stars, former president Mary Robinson has emerged as a leader of intellect, international credibility and moral courage to articulate for the inarticulate, and be a powerful advocate for the powerless.

Earlier this week she told the International Conference of National Trusts in Dublin that "climate justice suggests the time has come to think more deeply about our conceptions of obligation and responsibility – not just within nations but beyond borders".

Robinson is a relatively late convert to climate justice. She initially found the whole discussion to be highly technical, with a focus on collapsing glaciers and polar bears, but rarely about people.

"The impact of climate change on people is extremely important; every time I go to Africa, it's getting worse," she said. "Farmers don't know when to plant; the biggest impact is on precipitation, with flooding and prolonged droughts major threats to food security."

While bearing the brunt of climate-related impacts, the entire continent of Africa contributes just 2.8 per cent of global emissions. As we in Europe moan about the hassle of switching to low-energy light bulbs, only one in 12 people in Uganda has access to electricity. In central Kenya, people are eating cactus and pig feed as they cannot afford corn, while children hike 20 miles a day to collect water.

Kenya exports nearly half a million tons of flowers, fruit and vegetables (much of it by air) for the tables of Europe. For the poor, little has changed since Charles Trevelyan described our Famine as "the judgment of God . . . to teach the Irish a lesson".

Climate justice, Mrs Robinson concluded, "means understanding the enormous negative impacts our own behaviours have on distant places".

The recession is now being used by prosperous countries to welch on their development assistance. In Ireland's case, cuts of 24 per cent have already been made in our overseas development aid budget, amounting to over €220 million.

Ahead of the Copenhagen summit in December, the EU Commission has moved to break a global deadlock on assistance to help developing countries fight the effects of climate change – by raiding the development aid kitty. This will, says Oxfam, lead to 4.5 million additional deaths among children.

Climate justice seeks to redress the damage our over-consumption inflicts on the poor. Let's be honest: who really cares about poor people we've never met? We are, however, also stealing from the mouths of our own children, as we sow seeds that risk yielding the bitterest of harvests as our enduring gift to posterity.