

## Global Climate Dialogue

*Prepared by Kershney Naidoo*

In a historic moment of Justice for the Climate, the University of Pretoria played host to the Global Humanitarian Forum on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2009, where a joint initiative provided the platform for a landmark high level dialogue. The event was led by three key leaders from southern (Desmond Tutu), northern (Mary Robinson), and international (Kofi Annan) backgrounds. It aimed to establish a set of guiding global principles for a just response to climate change. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Mary Robinson (former President of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), and via video-link, Global Humanitarian Forum President, Kofi Annan (former UN Secretary-General) interacted with the more than 100 students and faculty members present during the debate. The intention of the Climate Justice Dialogue was to lend new impetus to an awareness of climate change and appropriate action for addressing it. The debate focused on a number of climate justice principles that the Forum had developed in collaboration with a range of civil society organizations. The Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI) was asked by Professor Calie Pistorius, the Rector of the University of Pretoria, to engage a team of enthusiastic students and academics to participate in the dialogue. FABI represented by a team of 35 eager, question-filled delegates made sure that their presence was seen as well as heard.

Climate Justice refers to the fact that much of the planet bears no responsibility for climate change, while the entire planet suffers its consequences. Mediated by BBC anchor Nisha Pillai, the privilege of being a part of such a high level dialogue had both students and academics abuzz. Beaming in via video link, Mr Kofi Annan silenced the audience with his powerful and heartfelt plea for mankind to take responsibility to protect our planet. Commenting that “it is a striking injustice that the world’s poorest groups, who also pollute the least, suffer the most under climate change”, Annan alluded to the fact that we, as a civilization, must pay greater attention to our lifestyles, which ultimately impact the planet. Archbishop Tutu in all his grace, set the tone for the dialogue when in his opening address he described just how ghastly the impact of climate change was at a South African level. The recent flash floods in the Soweto Township changed the lives of many poverty stricken South Africans, leaving them homeless and having to pick up the pieces and re-build their lives. Mary Robinson in her address also pleaded with the audience to enforce the overarching eight principles as set out by the GHF. Further, she remarked on the need for the Kyoto Protocol to be seen as a matter of grave urgency in the upcoming G8 Summit. It can no longer be overlooked, action needs to be taken, more so against polluters of the planet.

Identified as the “global south”, South Africa was chosen as the voice of awareness. Addressed by Professor Pistorius, it became clear that with the change in the climate, developing countries were disproportionately affected, thus making the need for strong leadership from both politicians and the people of vital importance. Students and academics were identified as a critical element of that sensitization and mobilization processes. Questions posed from both the audience and via the live web cast, were addressed by the panel of highly prestigious leaders. Awareness of climate justice was most definitely addressed with the ultimatum been placed in the hands of the young generation of leading scholars and scientists to act now in order to save the planet for future generations.

The dialogue ended in a commemorative tree planting ceremony. One of the FABI group and a participant in the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology (CTHB) programme, Kershney Naidoo, was chosen to represent the student body of the University of Pretoria in planting

one of three trees. The other trees were planted by Mary Robinson and Professor Calie Pistorius. This act symbolized the need for significant reductions in the carbon footprint of the world's populace. At the end of the day all attendees were highly motivated to make a positive change in order to seek justice for the planet.



His grace, Archbishop Desmond Tutu presenting his opening address.



Beaming in via video-link, Mr Kofi Annan captivated the audience with his humility and sincerity.



Professor Pistorius, Principal and Vice-Rector of UP, Mrs Mary Robinson and another member of UP staff, look on as Kershney Naidoo does her bit to reduce the global carbon footprint by planting a tree.