

Trócaire

Narrator: Hello, and welcome to the very first Trócaire Politics and Society podcast. This is the first in a series of podcasts designed to help students explore a variety of topics and issues over the course of the coming months linked to the work of Trócaire as an overseas development agency. In this first podcast we will cover aspects of Strand four, in particular topic 8.1 looking at actions that address sustainable development, topic 8.2 looking at arguments concerning sustainable development, and topic 8.3 looking at participants in the debate on sustainable development, focusing on Sean McDonagh. Throughout this episode we will hear from Sean about his time in the Philippines as a Columban missionary, his work with the T'Boli people, and how he underwent, as he called it, an Eco-conversion, due to witnessing the destruction of the Philippine forest, and how it affects all life, not just human life. He talks to us about climate change, and problems with the Irish dinner. He stresses the need for education, and what he sees as the main problems facing the planet in the next 20 to 30 years. As well as Sean and myself, you will hear from other Trócaire staff who will chip in with views and ideas linked to sustainable development. In the booklet that accompanies this podcast, you will find additional activities to complete in class or at home, as well as links to videos, and policy documents produced by Trócaire. I really hope you enjoy listening to this episode. So, let's begin... (01.51)

Narrator: I met Sean on a really warm, sunny day up in Navan where he is based with the Columbans, and I started by asking him to describe his early life, and what brought him to the Philippines as a missionary.

Sean: I went to Mindanao. I spent a year studying the language of Cebuano and the culture, and then I began to work in a parish there. In 1971, Mr Marcos declared martial law, and people were being put in jail for having ideas that people said were communist ideals. So, I got very much involved in the whole area of social justice. The Marcos dictatorship destroyed the lives of at least a hundred thousand people. I mean I have friends of mine that were put in jail, teachers who were teaching maths but actually were also teaching young women how to think. They were being put in jail for that. And there of course, it was just like being hit right in the face, I just saw on one side, the wonder and beauty of the tropical rainforest, I didn't know much about it, I wouldn't have known much about the species, but on the other side areas that had been clear-felled for ten or twenty years, topsoils gone, just like almost a moonscape. And then I said to myself, this has to be wrong, but then I look back at Catholic Social Teaching, and, there's nothing there. So, that was the beginning of my journey, I was angry, I was upset. (03.10)

Narrator: Sean's journey is one that lasted many decades, and brought him all over the world speaking to and educating people about sustainable development and climate change, but there is no doubt that his work with the T'boli people in the Philippines set him on this journey.

Sean: While I was there I became involved in working with a private group of Philipinos called the T'boli down in the south-east, up in the mountains, and that was a revelation to me. I was supposed to be working on anthropology, and particularly when I went down there I saw what had happened in the previous thirty years in terms of the destruction of the forest in the Philippines. I went down to see what happened there, I saw the impact also on, the destruction of landscape, and how it affects the people as well. Fundamentally we as Christians, we as human beings, we are one species marching into the future, but there are hundreds of other species around us, we should know their lifecycle. They are our companions, and that's the kind of language they use, and it is very much a new language in the Catholic Church, it was never spoken about before. So, in this encyclical of Pope Francis, is so new, it will take a long time for it to sink in to the imagination of people. (04.35)

Narrator: The encyclical Sean speaks of is Laudato Si, a letter from Pope Francis, not just to Catholics, but to everyone, appealing for all of humanity to care for our common home. Sean also rightly identifies fossil fuel use as one of the main factors contributing to climate change.

Sean: 30% of climate change is caused by transport, these are all industries of the 20th century that depend on fossil fuel, coal, oil, and diesel. They were cheap, and not alone do they cause climate change, but they also destroy the quality of the air. If you have ever been to China as I have many times, you go into these cities and the nitrous oxide will almost kill you. Now, one of the great things that has taken place over the last fifteen years is that energy from renewable sources is now almost as cheap as it is from fossil fuels, so that is going to make the biggest impact into the future. So I would to, for example, young people today, for example, a Swedish car maker has come out and said, after 2019, they are going to make no more petrol or diesel cars alone, they will make electric cars, or cars that will be electric and fossil fuels. In other words the change in terms of our energy sources has begun to happen. (06.07)

Narrator: The Swedish car maker that Sean refers to is Volvo, who have said that all new cars launched by the company from 2019 onwards will be partially or completely battery powered, a move that will help Volvo meet the legally binding carbon targets for new cars sold from the EU from 2020. Reduction in fossil fuel extraction and use is extremely important if we are to tackle climate change. Trócaire is currently involved in the global divestment from fossil fuels movement which is working to achieve this by encouraging investors not to put their money into fossil fuel companies. I asked Emmet Sheerin from Trócaire's campaigns team to explain this movement.

Narrator: Emmet, Trócaire is currently involved in the global fossil fuel divestment campaign, could you explain a little bit more about what that is?

Emmet: Yeah, fossil fuel divestment, it's really all about encouraging investors to take their money out of the fossil fuel industry. It makes no sense to have financial investments in an industry that is really at the heart of the climate crisis, so investments in coal, oil and gas. We know that if the world is to have any chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change, that money needs to be removed from fossil fuels and transferred then into clean, renewable, alternative investments, so renewable energy investments. So, that's I suppose the background to our campaign, that's the rationale, our key focus is to try and get the Irish government to remove public money, so, state investments, to remove them from the fossil fuel industry. We know that there are investments in some of the worst polluting fossil fuel companies, so our campaign is trying to get legislation to ensure that the Irish government has to remove those investments and prevent any future investments in the fossil fuel industry. We've had great success so far in the campaign, because of the work of Trócaire staff, volunteers and also ordinary citizens. The Irish parliament, the Dail, has gone some way in the process towards removing these investments, we're not fully there yet but we received cross party support on a motion that was proposing this law, so we still need to keep the fight going really, but there is great momentum behind this campaign so far. (08.46)

Narrator: Sean is critical of Ireland's role. He thinks we do more damage than we realise, and that we haven't done enough to tackle the issue over the past number of years.

Sean: In Ireland, we think of ourselves as helping 'third world' countries, but our reality on climate change is terrible, we are one of the worst countries in the world. The reality is we are animals that eat meat, but in the relative past where I live with private peoples, you had very small amounts of meat, nothing like the Irish dinner. A discussion about the Irish dinner becomes a very serious ecological and justice issue, and theological issue. Climate change in my estimation is one of the most serious issues economically, and ethically that people have to deal with today. They have to educate themselves about it, there are no simple answers. The one thing we can say from the scientific community, is that 95% of scientists who seriously study this are convinced that climate change is happening, and it's happening really fast. If I had have went to Trócaire in the 1980s and said could you give me 100 thousand for reforestation, they would look at me, and say, are there any guys in white coats here that might take this guy away, that was the reality, so all these things have changed. I think NGOs play a very important role, because they are now carrying the story, they are the ones, like Trócaire and yourself, ye have learned about climate change, I mean I remember talking to Trócaire 40 years ago and they weren't interested in climate change, so that is a good process in itself.

You have come from a place where you didn't think it was important, to an area where you now begin to see this is one of the most important moral issues of our time. (10.44)

Narrator: In recent years Trócaire has been at the forefront of the fight against climate change, both in our programme countries and here in Ireland, but as Sean says, this wasn't always the case. I asked Sorcha Fennel, who has worked for Trócaire for some time and is the current head of region for central, west and southern Africa, to describe how and why the view on climate change within Trócaire began to shift.

Sorcha: I joined Trócaire in the nineties, in the late nineties, I was in Africa prior to that but not with Trócaire, but a lot of the projects then in the nineties certainly were about food, food security, a big recognition that a lot of countries across Africa were using agricultural technologies that simply weren't able to support their basic food needs, eh late eighties height of the famines as well, the big famine that Bob Geldof raised all the attention on, Ethiopia, South Sudan, actually '84 and '87 were the two very big famines in Africa, Ethiopia and South Sudan, which were conflict and maybe drought related, climate you know so that was possibly the first time you'd see mass movement of people from one part of the country to another because rains didn't come, and that was in our sitting rooms, on our televisions, so that was perhaps one of the first times that I remember, or that the international community would remember seeing drought and failed crops, and the result of that being massive mobilisation of people and starvation. (12.08)

Narrator: So drought and failed crops and food security...at that time was the terminology that was being used, were people talking about climate change or was there recognition that this was a bigger global phenomenon or was it something that was considered more local.

Sorcha: Well you see the thing that's interesting is that, you know, I remember actually very well when the panel on climate change came out first, The UN panel, and kind of said, its official, there is climate change, you know, and I kind of sniggered to myself and said well, farmers across America, Latin America where I'd been working, and Africa, had been saying that their weather patterns had been changing for decades, so it actually was really interesting because, you know, my own very clear recollection of it was in '98, when I was in Honduras, and usually the hurricane season starts kind of late October and the hurricanes came a little earlier that year and then by the time I was leaving, within a two or three year space hurricane season started in August, that was a complete change in weather pattern, from hurricanes starting in October, to starting in August. I also remember in Honduras we started first of all doing irrigation, and it was because farmers were saying to us, the rains were supposed to fall on the first of May, and we know if we plant by the fifth or..., there were patterns to the weather, just like if you lived in rural Ireland, I mean Irish people, any communities that depend on the

land, and on rain, and on weather for their food production, they were the first scientists, if you wanted to say that, they were the first to say, this isn't working, the rains don't come when they are supposed to, and when they come they're too heavy, the dry spell in the middle stays too long etc. So in Latin America in '98 we started doing our first irrigation programmes, providing small scale farmers with drip irrigation, prior to that irrigation was for big scale farms for bananas, for plantations, and so we had to kind of, I suppose what I would consider, deal with the reality of living with drought. So we were no longer responding to drought, it was two or three consecutive years of like, this is part of reality. So farmers and rural communities around the world, people who lived beside oceans, people who lived in the rural west of Ireland, Ireland itself saw it, much heavier flooding, you know a certain times, late nineties, going into 2000s. I think what kind of signalled it was extreme weather events. Scientists had to you know, officially, claimed it much later of course that they needed scientific evidence to be accumulated across decades or across, across time and across countries, to definitively say that it was climate change, but certainly the communities that Trócaire has worked with, since the nineties, and now when I reflect upon it, obviously in the eighties, have been struggling with erratic weather. (14.22)

Narrator: At what stage did climate change become a major issue that started to draw the attention of everyone within Trócaire that it was a priority that we had to address?

Sorcha: I think it became evident that, you know the experience of climate change and its impacts was no longer happening in pockets of countries across the globe, it was actually everywhere, it was happening across Africa, across Latin America, and it was every year, and there were connections being made with our lifestyles here, and carbon emissions, and in terms of how that was actually causing what was happening, and when you look at the villages where we work, and the places where we work, and their consumption levels or lack of consumption, lifestyles that the people we work with live, it was really, really clear that this was a really big issue of justice. Essentially that our lifestyles, our lifestyles were contributing to what we were witnessing overseas, you know, to people's inability to grow their crop, to grow their food. So I think as an organisation, we recognised, you know, this is much bigger than us, much bigger than a few countries having drought, this is actually an issue of justice, we need to be vocal on this, we need to take responsibility as well. (15.34)

Narrator: It is clear from listening to Sean, Sorcha and Emmet that it has taken time for NGOs like Trócaire to appreciate the impact of climate change on sustainable development, but that in recent times right up to the present day, there has been a real drive to highlight the impact that climate change has on people around the world, and that it is in fact a justice issue. However, for many people around the world, their future is still very uncertain, and their ability to cope with the impacts of climate change that are increasing in power and frequency is in

question. I asked Sean to highlight some of the specific problems we face, in particular with water, and how he sees this developing over the next 25 years. (16.22)

Sean: Just look what is now happening with our water. I grew up in the 1950s and 60s, you could drink water from the river. Then we went to a form of agriculture that did enormous damage to our water, both our rivers, and also our ground water. I am absolutely sure that 25 years from now people on this planet, wherever they are, will be looking for where can I live in the world where I can breathe the air and drink the water, there are whole areas of China where you cannot drink the water, whole areas of the United States, or Europe, we have in many situations, we allow sewage to go straight into the Atlantic Ocean, so we have been irresponsible in the extreme, we have to be a people who tell the truth, however problematic that is, and on this area the truth will be challenging, but I think it's the only way forward. (17.15)

Narrator: As Sean alluded to, it is impossible to ignore the devastation climate change is having on the developing world. The current crisis in East Africa is extremely worrying for Trócaire, as it is happening across a number of our programme countries. I asked Sorcha about this crisis, and why it is happening.

Sorcha: Well this year in particular of course the whole east Africa crisis, Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, a lot of place where people also have nomadic lifestyles. They have their animals, they depend on moving from place to place to get water. That water simply isn't there so if you can imagine that your whole year, and your lifestyle is based on moving from one place to another with herds of camels, herds of cattle, it is your economy, it is how you exchange money, it is how you marry, it is your cash really, and all of that falls apart because actually none of the patterns that were there before are there and your livestock die. So the impact that that has on societies, on whole societies is, is, hugely significant, you can't reverse it. So communities in East Africa, on the one hand nomadic pastoralists, and on the other, people whose crops have literally failed, you know, year after year. I am seeing the same thing in Malawi, people whose crops have failed and can't send their children to school, the knock on effects, the first thing you do is take your child out of school, you sell a goat, you start to sell your assets, you go into debt, to borrow money, to buy food, so the cycle, you know, it doesn't simply last one season, I didn't have food, the debt, and the negative coping strategies that you implement at that time carry on for another year, two years, three years, so it's a cycle that is, I'm certainly seeing, recurrently across the countries where we work in. (18.48)

Narrator: At the heart of what Sorcha is saying, and indeed all our contributors to this podcast, is that we need to change our relationship with nature, to reset how we interact with other

species on the planet. Sean explains the impact climate change is having on other species, and sets it in a historical context.

Sean: Because of climate change, we are living in the sixth largest extinction of species since life began. In 2004 Chris Thomas of the University of Leeds wrote an article in 'Nature' saying in the next 50 years at least one million species will become extinct through climate change. The reason of course is the habitat changes, and the species cannot change fast enough through evolution, and therefore go extinct. What does it mean for us? Well for us it means, we are one of the species on the planet. Our philosophy and theology didn't do us a great service in saying, we are cut off completely from the platonic world, there is a chasm between humans and the rest of creation. Biology tells us very richly in the last 150 years we are a part of creation, we share 72% common DNA with mice and rats, we are part of everything. (20.03)

Narrator: This is a very interesting point that Sean makes. That part of the reason humans have continued to do damage to the environment, is because we have viewed ourselves as somehow detached from the rest of nature, or creation. Sean recognises the importance of changing the nature of this relationship, to one that recognises that we are part of creation, and reliant on it for our very existence. I spoke to Colm Hogan from Trócaire's church team about this changing view.

Colm: Well, I think Christian creation theology is in an evolving process, and in past years and maybe traditionally the church would have thought that God created the world, and God created us, and he gave us dominion over it. But however, in very recent times, especially with the publication of *Laudato Si'*, and also given that we are all made in the image and likeness of God, there is the argument that we are all coexisting with one another, and that it is our duty, and also, maybe our responsibility to look after creation, and take care of it. I suppose we often think about maybe what a document like *Laudato Si'* can offer someone, but one great phrase that Pope Francis used in the document was about what do we leave to the generation coming after us, and what do we leave to the children who are growing up. Father Sean's experience in the Philippines tells us that it is only through human experience, and through living with people and seeing what our actions on creation can create for another community, that's where the change can happen. When that change happens, as in father Sean's case, that change can be powerful and transformative. (21.59)

Sean: We depend on the planet for our food, and if we are losing one sixth of the food sources. We depend on the planet for our medicine. The great biologist Edward Wilson from Harvard said basically there is a race on and I saw it myself out in Lake Sebu where I lived, between scientists trying to find out what the structure of these plants are, or other creatures, and them becoming extinct. So in a sense we are doing enormous damage to ourselves.

Narrator: Logic would dictate that once we recognise as a species that we are reliant upon nature, or creation, for our very survival, then we would try our best to look after it. However, this doesn't seem to be the case. Education must play a part in changing this mind-set, but as Sean has said, we don't educate people enough about this issue. I spoke to Elisha Kelly from Trócaire's Development Education team about this.

Elisha: To be honest I don't think a lack of education is the problem, I think it is how we educate that is the issue. I believe that in schools we teach about climate change from a very scientific perspective, and we also throw around a lot of blame over who is causing it, and although this is extremely necessary and important as students need to know the scientific reasons behind climate change, in my opinion if we teach children from a young age to love nature, to play outdoors and learn to appreciate planet earth not as a resource to be consumed, but as a source of joy and happiness and something to be cherished then their relationship with nature will change and hopefully encourage life choices that are not based on mass consumption and destruction of the environment, but on preserving and nurturing the world around them. In Trócaire much of our work is based on tackling climate change. We work with children as young as three right up to third level students. Our focus has moved from looking at the science behind Climate Change to examining the social justice issues associated with Climate Change around the world, and also asking young people to take action against Climate Change. I believe our approach allows students to engage on many levels from the head to the heart – learning the facts but also appreciating the human impact of their choices. Ultimately we want young people to be equipped with the tools to not just make informed decisions but also to take action and ask questions. We want to help young people to discover their voice so that they are empowered to speak out against government policies and help bring about positive change on a national level. I have met so many inspiring young people who have a positive vision for the future and who are working together to make it happen – they believe they have the power to be the change that planet earth needs. (24.23)

Narrator: There is a real sense of urgency that comes across from all the people that I have spoken to for this podcast, and a recognition of the facts of climate change, and what it will mean for our lives in the future. I asked Sean what he thinks we need in order to change the way we approach climate change and our relationship with nature.

Sean: What we actually need is movement, we need mitigation, and we need policies and programmes to cut down the amount of carbon dioxide that goes in to the atmosphere. We need a lot of money for countries that are already being affected by the reality of climate change in terms of just the habitability of the places where they live, and most of all we need new technologies because we are starting on a journey, I think, which is saying 'the end of fossil fuel era'. Experts are telling us now a very troubling point. They are saying to us that we

have to leave 80% of fossil fuel in the ground if we are to maintain a temperature below the 2 degree Celsius rise. (25.27)

Narrator: 80% of our fossil fuels must remain in the ground. That's a lot less fuel out there. I asked Emmet to explain this idea a little further. Ok Emmet, could you explain a little bit more about this idea of having to keep 80% of our fossil fuels in the ground.

Emmet: To have any chance of avoiding runaway climate change, 80% of fossil fuel reserves need to remain underground, this means that the majority of coal, oil and gas reserves owned by fossil fuel companies and governments can never be extracted and burned, and this implies a major over-valuation of fossil fuel assets, indicating that there is a carbon bubble that will eventually burst, and this bubble will have serious implications for investors, including pension beneficiaries. (26.17)

Narrator: In Ireland we know that bubbles are not always a good thing, and we also know that an overvaluation of assets, like houses for example, can lead to collapse. Nobody wants that! So what needs to happen? What needs to be done? Well, Sean brings it back to government a number of times during his interview; debates in the Dail, proper policies, leadership. I asked Sorcha what she thinks is needed to tackle climate change. (26.40)

Sorcha: I think there are two things needed, I think the first thing is political will, that's what's needed anywhere in the world to bring about change is policy, and so we need political leadership on that. And the second thing is people, and in particular young people. I think young people have a fundamental role in any change, actually if you reflect on it, that has ever come about. Young people have a bigger stake in this than anybody because it is their future, it is their collective future. So I think young people in a way first of all need to internalise this, they need to really deeply understand the connection between lifestyle and climate change, and between lifestyle and consequence, even if it is far away. If we don't truly internalise it then I don't think we can be as committed or as driven or as motivated as we need to be, and there is an urgency. I mean even across Europe already this year you see forty degree temperatures, we're having heat waves that countries have never experienced, young people have the energy, have the stake, have the passion to just mobilise and put that pressure for political will, and take actions that will demand change from our leaders, in order to be able to support Trócaire, and the people in developing countries to deal with the impacts of and mitigate the future impacts of climate change. (27.46)

Narrator: Political will. This is the firm intention or commitment on the part of a government to carry through a policy, especially one which is not immediately successful or popular. Emmet agrees that political will is the key element. (28.00)

Emmet: Yeah I would say political will is absolutely essential, it's arguably the most important eh thing for our decision makers and politicians to actively help the country and set in motion our transition away from fossil fuels eh to a more sustainable country, it's absolutely essential but, you know, how will political will come about? Its vital that ordinary Irish citizens make politicians do this. At the moment politicians don't see it, don't see climate change as a priority issue, and politicians have constantly told me in my work that we won't consider it a priority issue unless we hear about it from voters. So you got to remember that politicians work for ordinary people in society, and young people who will be voting in the next couple of years when they turn 18 need to remember that your vote is really really important. You can help dictate to politicians and would be politicians what the priorities are they need to focus on. So for example at the last general election Trócaire had a campaign trying to get ordinary Irish people, ordinary voters to talk to elected representatives and candidates about the need for Ireland to do more to tackle climate change, to reduce our carbon emissions, and so that basically meant that when a candidate came to your doorstep looking for your vote, that you said 'well I will vote for you if you prioritise climate action', you know and Trócaire have also been involved, along with other organisations, development organisations and environmental organisations, in bringing about, helping to bring about climate law in Ireland. So that's a really good example of a political instrument, but that took pressure from ordinary citizens saying to politicians 'look we want the law in Ireland that will help us as a country reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. So thankfully we have that law now, its not a perfect law, but we have one. (30.08)

Narrator: Emmet also had some great advice for young people living in Ireland today...

Emmet: Yeah, so I guess there's three main pieces of advice that I'd give. The first would be to really do some research and understand the science behind climate change, why is it happening, and why is it such a burning issue, that we need to take action on. Also, just do research to find out where your local politicians stand on the issue. Are they in favour of taking strong climate action, do they believe in renewable technology, where do they stand on reducing Ireland's climate emissions. Another thing to do is talk to your friends, family, and school mates about this issue, communicate the importance of taking action on climate change, and also very importantly, communicate that climate change is a justice issue. The fact that people in the developing world are suffering the most because of climate change, but they have done the least to cause it, so people your age in places like Malawi and other parts of the developing world are suffering because of climate change, but they have done the least to cause it. The third thing I'd say is talk to your TDs about climate change, get them to justify their positions, and their political party positions, and where they stand on climate change, and to justify their track record in tackling the issue, and you could bring them into your school to

do this, or you could go visit them in their local constituency offices, that's really powerful, get out of your school and visit politicians, and make them justify their positions. This is so important because politicians, without you talking to them and demanding answers and actions from them, there won't be the political will there to really reduce carbon emissions. Remember, climate change is the greatest injustice of our time, we have to act now on this issue, not next year, not ten years' time, so put it up to politicians and decision makers, and you can do that. (32.12)

Narrator: We need to act, and we need to act now, this is the clear message that comes through from both Sean, and the staff from Trócaire. There is no more time to waste when it comes to climate change, and transitioning to a future that is just and sustainable for all the people on our planet. Climate change is a justice issue affecting generations of people. And it will take the efforts of this current leaving cert generation, and the next, and the next in order to ensure that humans do make that transition, that eco-conversion as Sean called it, and recognise that we are a part of nature, part of creation, and we have a special role to play as stewards of our common home.

Narrator: Thank you very much, this brings us to the end of our first politics and society podcast, I hope you have enjoyed listening to it, and I hope that it helps you understand more about Sean McDonagh the man, his contribution to the debate on sustainable development and climate change, and how climate change is an environmental justice issue that affects the poorest people of our world the most. If you have any comments, criticisms, suggestions or recommendations, please send them in an email to stephen.farley@trocaire.org, and look out for our second podcast coming later in the autumn, focusing on child rights in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel.

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