R E P O R T

Green Foundation Ireland and
The Bray Heads U3A Group
co-host a TALK on

Building a Just Transition to a Zero-Carbon Economy

Given by: **Sinéad Mercier**

Venue: **by Zoom** ***(details given after registration)***

Wednesday 16 September 2020
10:30am – 12:00 noon

Admission to this event is FREE but you MUST register beforehand.
You can do so through our website at
www.greenfoundationireland.ie

Building a Just Transition to a Zero-Carbon Economy

Sinéad Mercier is a consultant on climate change law and policy with a special focus on just transition and human rights approaches. She is currently working with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and has previously worked for the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), the Green Party of Ireland and Philip Lee law firm. Her new book is *'Men Who Eat Ringforts'* written with Michael Holly and Eddie Lenihan, and published with Askeaton Public Arts (2020).

THEME

The theme of Sinéad's talk, which is entitled ***"Building a Just Transition to a Zero-Carbon Economy",*** asks the questions 'what is a Just Transition?' and 'where are we heading?' and gives an overview of the origins of the principle of just transition in climate action, as well as outlining examples of best practice in Australia, Germany and Scotland.

Jane Grimson of the Bray Heads U3A Group welcomed everyone to the online talk, saying they were absolutely delighted to be co-hosting the event with Green Foundation Ireland.

THE KEY POINTS MADE BY SINÉAD

Sinéad began by giving an explanation of the meaning and origin of the phrases *'Climate Justice*' and a *'Just Transition*'.

The Paris Agreement in 2015 (or COP 21) declared the aim to keep any future increase in temperatures below 2^{o} centigrade.

If we are to achieve the aims of the Paris Agreement, we must implement major changes in how we live our lives; change how we heat our homes; how we travel; our farming practices. We have to stop using fossil fuels (oil, gas and coal) in order to de-carbon our economy because carbon is fuelling the temperature rise.

The Paris Agreement acknowledged that the countries which will be most damaged by Climate Change are actually those that are least developed and have a very low carbon lifestyle, for example, many island communities across the globe.

Those of us with the most affluence, with extreme wealth or what Sinéad called *"tax-avoided wealth",* are the people who live high carbon lifestyles but won't face the same challenges in any transition to a low carbon society.

A *Just Transition* to a low carbon economy aims to make sure that "no-one is left behind" in poverty because, for example:

- they have lost their job in a coal mine, or in Bord na Móna or some other carbon intensive industry;
  or
- they live in low-quality housing and cannot afford to heat their homes.

A Climate Justice focus rejects any argument that we have to have a Jobs v the Environment narrative.

The Paris Agreement refers to "human rights" and coalition building with workers' rights.

Climate Justice sees *"energy as a right or a public good not a commodity for wealthy and powerful countries".*

When the ESB was privatised, jobs were lost and energy bills increased, yet everyone, rich and poor alike, pay a levy or flat charge to cover the cost of upgrading the grid.

Energy poverty is a major problem in Ireland. Both Irish Rural Link and MABS have done research on energy poverty.

Local Authority Adaptation Plans to address Climate Change should have a Climate Justice focus.

Case Studies

Sinéad referred to work she did for NESC about what is happening in other countries.

In the past, communities were often encouraged to move in order to work in peat and coal mines and they became essentially State-owned energy communities, totally dependent on a way of life and a cultural identity built up around the work they did.

It was International Labour Organisations that endeavoured to protect workers when mines ceased operating or governments decided to phase out reliance on coal – communities were *expected* to feel guilty about working in an industry that was damaging the environment.

Germany adopted a bottom-up and a strong social dialogue approach which was helped by a network of very strong local government. Germany viewed the workers as a resource with their own knowledge and skill sets that could be transferred to community-owned wind energy. Germany exercised strong state leadership.

Wales on the other hand adopted a top-down approach. Wales decided to rely on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and ended up with call-centres.

Melbourne in **Australia** is another example of the jobs in the mines being tied up with a way of life and cultural identity; the coal mines were privatised in the 1980s.

In 2014 there was a huge fire in a mine; the State came to the rescue; the lesson for environmentalists and any government managing a transition is not to go into such communities as activists but with humility and respect; with the aim to help; not to speak down to such communities but to them or with them. In Melbourne Government backed a local plan.

Scotland is regarded as a leader in *community owned energy* but still has high energy poverty.

There is a need to define what is meant by *community owned energy*.

The oil and gas industries in Scotland agree that much of the workers' knowledge and skills acquired in their industries are transferable away from fossil fuels into renewables but feel there is no Government commitment or Government Plan to support or encourage such transfer – for example, **Norway** has a State Pension Fund that invests in wind. Meanwhile the workers feel betrayed; they were encouraged to move from coal to oil and now they are being told to move again from oil to offshore wind.

In **Poland** there is an important cultural context for the reluctance to engage with a Just Transition to a fossil-free economy. There used to be a strong unionised labour force but the fall of the Berlin Wall led to privatisation, the fall of unions and the rise of oligarchs. Unions are now confined to coal mines and are aligned to right-wing politics.

Ireland needs a Climate Action Plan that is not market-based. However, it is difficult to discuss human rights in a market context. Language is important and we must see energy as a right.

More than once in her talk Sinéad mentioned *Community Owned Energy* needs to be defined. This connects nicely with the talk that GFI and the Bray Heads U3A Group hope to arrange on Micro-Grids, etc. It is easy to generate community energy; very difficult to keep ownership of it.

A lively Q&A session followed, with a total of 44 people attending this first online event that Green Foundation Ireland was involved with.

Green Foundation Ireland ***18 September 2020***