
Justice, Human Rights, and Climate Change

A CONVERSATION WITH MARY ROBINSON,
UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S SPECIAL ENVOY
FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

FLETCHER FORUM: *How did your time as the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights shape your views on climate change?*

MARY ROBINSON: What is striking now is the fact that climate change was not on the global human rights agenda when I was High Commissioner. It was after I left office as High Commissioner—when I spent a lot of time in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world—that I started to see just how serious an impact the changing climate was having on human rights. In the years when I ran my “Realizing Rights” organization, I met with people all over the world who drew my attention to the reality that individual, community, and national development progress was being wiped out by extreme weather events and a changing climate. It was then that I recognized that climate change had become the biggest human rights challenge of our time.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What is climate justice? And why is it an important aspect of the climate change discussions?*

ROBINSON: Climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centered approach to climate action. It is about protecting those with least capacity to protect themselves and who bear least respon-

Mary Robinson was appointed UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Climate Change in 2014. She is President of The Mary Robinson Foundation—Climate Justice (MRF CJ) and Chair of the Board of Trustees. She served as the seventh president of Ireland (1990-1997) and was the first woman to be elected, and she is the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997-2002).

sibility for the causes of the problem. Climate justice is about equitably sharing the actions needed to avoid dangerous climate change, and about equitably sharing the benefits of the transition to a carbon neutral world.

Climate justice in that sense creates an enormous opportunity for the world—because the path to dealing with climate change is also the path that brings clean energy and sustainable livelihoods to billions of people.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What are the differing ways in which climate change affects men and women? What role will women play in combatting climate change?*

ROBINSON: As my awareness of climate change grew, I saw that it was often the women who were dealing with the greatest hardships related to climate outcomes. That is because women are already living in vulnerable situations and are without access to their rights in many parts of the world—and climate change exacerbates this vulnerability. Women are often the managers of households, the caregivers, and the farmers who have to deal with the consequences of climate change. For example, women have to walk longer distances to get water for their families as water resources become more scarce, and erratic planting seasons affect women farmers’ ability to feed their families. These kinds of realities mean that women everywhere are often the most conscious of the realities of climate change.

Building from this consciousness also highlights the fact that women must be at the core of any meaningful action on climate change. There will be no solution to climate change without including women as key actors.

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For example, over 2 billion people—mostly women—still cook using dangerous and dirty energy sources. We simply can’t stabilize the climate unless these women are able to move to safer, cleaner cooking methods. So, women are central to success in combating climate change, and that is an opportunity that can be grasped if women’s rights are realized and if action is taken to build resilience to climate impacts.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What role can and should businesses play in fighting climate change?*

ROBINSON: Climate change is being discussed by mainstream businesses, and some global businesses are leading the way with brave and innovative

commitments. However, there are not yet enough businesses involved in such a meaningful way, and that needs to change. All types of business, big and small, can get involved and become informed participants in the process.

Businesses can bring a sharp problem-solving mentality to climate action. And from that, they can work out the things that they can do themselves—within their own businesses—for example, changes relating to supply chains. But businesses can also highlight where they need clear public policy, including international public policy—and use their advocacy capabilities to build movement toward an international legally binding agreement in Paris that supports the global transition to a zero carbon climate resilient economy.

FLETCHER FORUM: *How have the climate negotiations—the positions of governments, businesses, and NGOs—evolved since the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen?*

ROBINSON: First of all, it is clear that almost all governments now recognize that urgent climate action is essential, and they are all calling for an ambitious deal in Paris. But for that goal to be achieved, it is essential that a very wide movement of businesses, municipalities, civil society organizations, faith groups, and citizens grows and supports governments to make ambitious commitments.

We also need to remember that other parts of the international system can play a role in addressing the climate challenge and informing climate actions. The UN Human Rights Council is addressing the human rights dimensions of climate change, the
 UN Independent Experts on human rights are looking at climate impacts and solutions across the range of their work, and professional bodies such as the International Bar Association have assessed the role and the capacity of law to protect human rights in a changing climate. This broader engagement of actors both generates support for climate action and informs the actions
 taken by countries and communities. From a climate justice perspective, it is critical that all climate actions are informed by human rights so that they benefit peoples’ lives as well as safeguard the planet.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *How would you define success at this year's climate conference?*

ROBINSON: To some degree we will only be able to measure success many years in the future, because the ultimate goal in Paris is to set the world on an irreversible pathway to a stable climate. Success in Paris will be measured in years to come by the extent to which it protects people in vulnerable situations around the world—by stabilizing the climate, providing support

..... for adaptation, and ensuring that no one is left behind in the transition to a zero carbon world.

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..... In the immediate aftermath of the Paris conference, success will be based on evidence of transformative leadership from all countries to transition to zero-carbon, climate-resilient development. Developed countries will have to commit to rapidly peaking and reducing emissions while delivering support to enable climate action in developing countries.

The transformative leadership developing countries must demonstrate is different—and in my opinion, far more profound. Developing countries will have to achieve equitable access to sustainable development without fossil fuels. This is the greater challenge and must be enabled through unprecedented levels of support from the international community.

All countries and citizens will have to demonstrate willingness to act together, motivated by enlightened self-interest and human solidarity for a better future. *f*