
MARY ROBINSON FOUNDATION – CLIMATE JUSTICE



Interview with Mary Robinson, President of the Republic of Ireland 1990-1997, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 1997-2002, founder of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice

‘I came quite late to understanding climate change,’ admits Mary Robinson. Even in 1997, when she was UN High Commissioner, ‘I was in a silo, as happens in big organizations: another part of the UN was dealing with climate.’

In 2002 she decided to found a small NGO called Realizing Rights to work on economic and social rights in African countries. ‘I felt passionately, after my five years as High Commissioner, that we weren’t taking seriously enough the rights that matter so much if we don’t have them, like the rights to food and water, health and education, and also issues around women, peace and security.’

Around 2003, 2004, she says, she became aware of something she had completely missed, the injustice of climate change, which disproportionately affected those who were least responsible in African countries. ‘They weren’t driving cars, they didn’t have major manufacturing, and yet they were suffering from terrible climate impacts. I always think not so much of climate change as of climate justice.’

Robinson outlines five layers to this injustice:

- 1 There is the injustice that she first became aware of in Africa, of climate change affecting most those who had contributed least to it. ‘It affects the poorest countries, the poorest communities, indigenous peoples, even poor communities in rich countries, disproportionately.’
- 2 The gender dimension: because of their different social roles, their lack of power, their lack of access to land rights and loans from banks, even a lack of agricultural training, women are more affected than men.
- 3 Intergenerational injustice: ‘children don’t see a secure future because we’re not taking our responsibilities seriously enough.’
- 4 Pathways to development: industrialised countries built their economies on fossil fuels, which we now need to wean ourselves off. ‘But developing countries need to develop to take their people out of poverty. Before Paris,’ she says, ‘many developing countries said they wanted to go the way of clean energy’, but they needed investment, technology and training, which they haven’t really got. ‘If they find oil, gas and coal, what do they do – and what’s our responsibility in relation to technology sharing?’

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Fifth is what we're doing to nature – the loss of biodiversity, species extinctions, the fact that we're not living in harmony with Mother Nature. 'Having been in Greenland last summer with Active Philanthropy, I realized when I sat listening to that glacier calving that I was completely at one and crying because we were putting too much pressure on nature, and that was a very important part of my learning.'

How can philanthropies support the UN, locally and individually, given that it's the central institution to advance and coordinate the global response to climate change? 'We look to the UN and other international organisations for the big frameworks', she says, and in 2015 we got those frameworks. 193 countries negotiated the 2030 agenda with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and there was the Paris climate agreement. Then in October 2018 'we got the interpretation of scientists that we all have to stay at or below 1.5 degrees, and that means we have to reduce carbon emissions by 45 per cent over the next 10 years. And that's the big framework.'

Philanthropy is beginning to help with the SDGs, she says, supporting countries and communities, towns, cities, all of us, to be more aware of the SDGs. 'In many ways Covid-19 has now caused us all to change our habits. We're not buying superfluous, over-consumption, throwaway plastic things because we cannot go to the shops. We're back to basics, and that's an important message for the richer part of the world, that we need to reduce consumption.' Philanthropy can help communities in practical ways to work within these frameworks.

What kind of stories work? Fearmongering isn't helpful, in Robinson's view. That's why the byline of her climate justice book was 'hope, resilience and the fight for a sustainable future'. She was trying to bring out 'the stories of the courage and resilience of those faced with terrible shocks that they were not responsible for. They could well have made us feel more guilty about it. But that wasn't what they were doing. They were actually just trying to help their communities and build more resilience.' These stories can be inspirational, she says, particularly now because Covid has made us a little bit more compassionate.

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What have we learned from Covid-19? She spells out several key points:

PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR MATTERS: That's what's protecting us from this virus. We have to protect the more vulnerable and health workers and care workers. There are also key lessons for us as consumers: 'to consume less, to be more choosy about what we're going to buy because of how it's produced, etc, etc.'

SCIENCE MATTERS: Governments were not listening to climate scientists, but we are now listening to health experts. 'Hopefully there will be a crossover to climate scientists.'

GOVERNMENT MATTERS: Harsh judgements will be made on countries that failed to protect their populations, she says, leading to increased deaths.

COMPASSION MATTERS: We are seeing empathy for our neighbours and for people that are less well-off in our countries. Empathy will help us to find solutions to problems connected to the virus.

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Interview part 2 with Mary Robinson, President of the Republic of Ireland 1990-1997, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 1997-2002, founder of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice

Bringing women's voices to the table

When Mary Robinson first talked about the injustice of climate change and small island states and least developed countries, people's response tended to be that all this had nothing to do with them. This has changed since COVID-19, she thinks. It is exacerbating injustices and emphasising the intersectionality between poverty, race, gender, being a migrant, being indigenous, being a person with a disability. 'But we have more empathy for suffering than we used to because we are all suffering to some extent, and this has opened up a space for compassion.'

When Robinson went to her first climate conference, Copenhagen in 2009, human rights and gender were not part of the discussion. Instead, the discussion was technical, largely male, and very scientific. The following year, at the Cancún COP, a group on Women Leadership on Gender and Climate was formed.

Their first success came at Doha in 2012, where the group pushed for changes to introduce gender parity in COP delegations, and started to bring the voices of grassroots, indigenous and young women to the table. This made a great difference because the delegates, mainly city-based and technicians, didn't have a feel for what was happening on the ground, nor did they understand the importance of women's issues. These frontline stories bring out the different and worsening impacts of climate change on women. They also show that women are not just victims; they're also actors for change.

Again, there are lessons to be learned from COVID-19:

- It's largely women, many among the lowest paid, who are helping us address the critical COVID crisis: as care workers, health workers; as cleaners in our hospitals and care homes.
- It's largely women who are giving good leadership in the crisis: Angela Merkel in Germany, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, the president of Taiwan, the prime ministers of Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. These women are ready to listen to the science and to take tough decisions. They also have a strong instinct to protect their people from a terrible crisis like COVID.

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Previously, big environmental philanthropies were not all that focused on communities on the front line of the impacts of climate change, so only a small proportion of funding was going to women on the ground – though they were key agents for change and resilience in their communities. Then a constituency began to be built up around climate justice. The Oak Foundation, for example, set up a climate justice resilience fund. The amount of money going into it was still very small, given the importance of building resilience, but it was a start.

Recommendations for funders

- Make sure the voices of women are heard – grassroots, indigenous and young women, migrants, women with disabilities.
 - Make the case to other foundations that money should be going to grassroots projects led by women.
 - Advocate for more gender equality – something the world badly needs.
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