



May 2014

Human Rights in the Age of Climate Change

An Interview with Mary Robinson

Allen L. White of the Tellus Institute interviews former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson about how to build the political will to address the climate crisis and why a rights-based approach must lie at the core of sustainable development in the 21st century.

You spent three decades in public service in Ireland prior to your involvement in global affairs. How did this experience shape your worldview, particularly regarding the strengths and limitations of nation-states rising to the challenges of globalization?

I have always been particularly interested in issues of human rights and equality, both as a senator in the Irish Parliament and a lawyer in the Irish courts. When I was elected president in 1990, I anticipated representing my country on human rights issues, as I did in Somalia and Rwanda, most notably.

In those years, I was very focused on Ireland's membership in the European Union. I saw the EU as the outer edge of thinking about cross-national relationships. In 1997, it was a great honor to be appointed the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It was my first time working in a multilateral setting, seeing Europe and North America as regions within a broader global context. I had to shift from a national and European perspective to a global one with regard to the protection and promotion of human rights.

I was also aware that the UN membership comprises nations, but that as High Commissioner, I had to remain faithful to the first three words of the UN Charter: "We the peoples." To do this,

I had to stand up to heads of state or ministers, sometimes causing unpopular moments in a system that prefers a more diplomatic route. In many countries, human rights were not being respected, and sometimes the state itself was the worst perpetrator of such violations. Other times, poverty and neglect were the major causes of inadequate human rights conditions. Whatever the cause, I felt compelled to speak out. In those days, the role of business in the area of human rights was at its very earliest stage. In the 21st century, it is vital that corporations also respect all human rights and that states ensure protection of their people from corporate violation of such rights.

You speak passionately and consistently about the need for a rights-based approach to global issues and global development. Why a rights-based approach? And how is it different from what we see today?

A very important part of a rights-based approach is the difference it makes in helping people to understand their own sense of dignity and worth. I have seen dignity and worth repeatedly abused. When I was in Uganda, a widow who had been thrown out of her house met with a small NGO. The NGO told her that she had the same right to food, safe water, health, education, and shelter not only as other women, but as men. She was astonished to hear this, but deeply affirmed as well. It helped her to return to caring for her family and to obtaining microcredits and secure job training in manual skills normally associated with men. As this and countless other stories show, when the dispossessed grasp the concept of rights, a profound shift in self-esteem and dignity is possible.

A rights-based approach aligns with the actions of UN member states that have voluntarily signed various covenants and conventions that embody their responsibility—and accountability—to protect various rights of their peoples. If we ignore those commitments, I believe we are undermining what governments themselves have said are standards to which they should be held accountable.

I think it was a mistake for the Millennium Development Goals not to build in a human rights and governance component. The focus was more on the statistics of attacking poverty, the statistics of reducing child mortality, and other quantitative indicators of progress. If governance and protection of human rights had been incorporated, I believe we would have achieved more in

the last 15 years. Now, the Sustainable Development Goals offer a new opportunity to learn that lesson, to embed governance and human rights in a new development framework.

In view of this rights-based perspective, is there a need to codify in a single framework the many disparate statements, covenants, and accords that speak to rights of one kind or another?

Not necessarily. Each of the major international conventions—on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; on the Rights of the Child; on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; on the Elimination of All Forms of Racism; and Against Torture—has a treaty body and a reporting obligation. Thus, it is already a very well-developed field with commitments and accountability that can work well if the political will is present.

Sadly, the United States has not ratified key covenants and conventions on economic and social rights. There is a tendency from the US perspective to regard rights to food and safe water, health, education, and shelter as political aspirations rather than responsibilities of the government. In contrast, the vast majority of countries in the world accept the human rights approach. Implementation may fall short, but at least they formally commit, and that is the critical first step.

Only two countries have failed to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child—the United States and Somalia. I think at some point the United States Congress must address this situation. In a similar vein, the United States sees itself as a champion of women’s rights, yet it has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which has been widely ratified by countries worldwide.

How do you view the US’s refusal to sign such international accords?

I think American exceptionalism sometimes stands in the way of understanding that all nations will be better off by supporting an integrated human-rights agenda and participating fully as paid-up members of all such covenants and conventions. Many in the US, and especially in Congress, think that the country does not need international agreements because it already has a strong record in human rights protections. But this view is not borne out by the *UN Human*

Development Report. The US does not score well on the protection of women or children, or on various economic indicators. It is quite a paradox. The wealthiest and most powerful country falls short on the Human Development Indicator. It can and should do better. I say that as a friend and great admirer of the US. I have this conversation with US friends and believe that the problem principally lies in Congress's unwillingness to ratify any international treaty that would require them to make changes in the law. To do so would represent an infringement on US sovereignty in the eyes of many policymakers.

Over many years, you have staked out a constellation of advocacy positions that were extraordinarily brave and before their time. This is not the case for political leadership in much of the world, where political will is in short supply.

I think about that a lot at the moment because my foundation focuses on what we call climate justice—not just climate change, but the fact that we have to bear in mind the injustice of the way that climate affects the poorest communities and the poorest countries. The recent Second Working Group Report of the IPCC underscored the urgency of this issue, but we lack a political will globally to deal with this.

I have also been thinking about that because we are in an anniversary year, that of 1944-1945. I see that time as related to the current historical moment. Why was there so much political will immediately after World War II? On the minds of political leaders were the mistakes made in the aftermath of the First World War, the Depression, a Second World War, and the Holocaust, as well as the nuclear bombing in Japan and onset of the Cold War.

The “never again” sentiment of solidarity galvanized political will. The UN Charter soon emerged, as did the Bretton Woods Institutions, the Marshall Plan, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Why so many seminal achievements in such a short time?

I think the answer lies in the power of the nation-states and their willingness to exercise that power. Since that time, a gradual erosion of both power and will has occurred; waves of privatization have led to the increase of corporate power. Today, it is harder to deal with global warming because it requires confrontation of the powerful fossil fuel industry. Governments today do not have the same power, capacity, and will that they did in 1945.

You paint a picture of political will as corroded or undermined by corporatization of the political system.

To an extent. I think it is therefore right that the Secretary General of the UN is convening a Climate Summit in September to try to activate the political will of governments. Such will is weaker than it was decades ago, and horizons are shorter-term than they used to be. The potential of some business leaders to step up is real, but to realize this potential, governments must lead. More than ever, they must reclaim the power and reassert the responsibility of the post-war era. They must exercise the authority they have ceded.

We need to reinvent state authority to take urgent and equitable action. In poor countries with weak governments, we need new regulatory frameworks to address climate change. Worldwide, keeping warming below two degrees Celsius will require reaching zero carbon emissions by 2050. I don't hear many political leaders publicly recognizing this reality even in the face of growing climate urgency. Today, in the economic and social spheres, the market rules. Yet climate solutions are not achievable through market mechanisms. Such solutions are complex equations that coningle economy, sustainability, development, and poverty, all of which require assertive government interventions.

Ultimately, I believe that what moves political leaders is citizen demand. We need to create a movement that will ensure a safe world in the coming decades.

Climate is the classic case of a problem where solutions are truly global. Even if we do re-empower nations, would that be sufficient absent a more muscular international regime?

I agree that it is ultimately a global problem that transcends all national boundaries. The current state-centric climate process is unjust. The poorest countries and poorest peoples—the small island states, the indigenous peoples, the least-developed countries—are bearing the brunt of climate disruption. It is not a future possibility. They experience damage and dislocation now.

In both rich and poor nations, we are witnessing climate volatility, but the damage is far more intense in the world's poorest nations, which are least responsible for the problem. So we face a huge moral obligation to think in terms of an equitable response that moves well beyond

incremental progress. I do believe that we can achieve this through the existing multilateral system. It is not perfect, but I think that if there is enough pressure from citizens, civil society, and enlightened business, then we can achieve a robust climate agreement by 2015. But it will not be easy.

You mentioned the role of business in addressing contemporary global problems. What is your vision of responsible business in the coming decades?

For the reasons that we have been discussing, it is even more important that the corporate sector understand its responsibilities in the area of protection and promotion of human rights, and be held to those responsibilities. That is why I have very much welcomed the work of Professor John Ruggie in his role as a special representative of the UN Secretary General on business and human rights. After I ended my term as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, when I was focusing on my new organization, Realizing Rights, I worked very closely with Professor Ruggie in developing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

This was an enormous step forward. This framework stresses three words: protect, respect, and remedy. First, the guidelines make clear that states have an obligation to protect their people from corporate violations of their rights.

Second, all corporations have a responsibility to protect all human rights. This is not just a passive obligation: it is a due diligence requirement. They should have human rights due diligence within their governance structure and within their sustainability portfolio.

Third, we need more remedies—not just judicial remedies. This implies the responsibility of the corporate sector in the area of climate mitigation because such mitigation is not just a business issue; protection from climate destabilization is a human right. I hope that we will see an increasing popular movement in support of divestment in fossil fuel companies coupled with investment in renewable energy. Divestment alone is not a climate justice approach. It may help some, but it does not address equity. We need also to invest in renewables and make the technologies available to developing countries so that they have a real option to make the energy transition.

A formidable agenda lies ahead. Sometimes, when we talk about climate change and climate justice, we talk too much about the doom and gloom of an unlivable world if we do not move rapidly. Our prospects will be greatly enhanced if we pay more attention to the opportunity side. Renewable energy promises not just relief from climate volatility, but also multiple benefits in the form of cleaner air, more productive agriculture, and healthier families.

You have spoken eloquently about the intersection of gender equity and climate: that the effects of climate change are unevenly distributed, and that climate solutions must recognize such disparities.

In my foundation, we focus on women's leadership on climate justice precisely because of the huge gender impacts of climate. When climate destabilization exacerbates poverty in already poor countries, the women in the home are the ones who pick up the pieces, put food on the table, travel further to draw water, and search for firewood in ever more remote locations. Because of the differing domestic and occupational roles of men and women, the gender impacts of climate are dramatic.

Women tend to be practical and resilient in managing risk and hardships. In climate-stressed situations, as I have seen, the women's groups hold the schools together even in the face of floods. They are finding the solutions. They are the local change agents.

Moreover, in a developed country context, I think women—and I speak for myself—are more likely to think intergenerationally. My five grandchildren will be in their forties in 2050. I think a lot about what kind of world they will share with over nine billion others. For a grandmother today, for a mother of very young children today, it is the time to think about the future. We have not been good stewards of our planet, and we are getting worse. We are creating injustices for children yet unborn, and their children as well. I think that reality can motivate women to assume a leadership role in climate justice.

Citizen protests are on the ascent. A recent study reported over 800 since 2006 and determined that the number one catalyst has been demands for “true democracy.” What would you say to these thousands of citizens in the street who feel disenfranchised and demand that their voices be heard?

I think the essence of what they are seeking is human dignity and rights. Article I of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights begins by affirming that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Dignity is a sense of self-worth. It is having a stake in the community. For many people, it is having a job, the means to a decent life. We do not at the moment have sufficiently people-centered policies. We need a rights-based approach to climate change, youth unemployment, and other urgent issues facing the world in the 21st century. We cannot afford to lose generations of young people whose self-worth is damaged beyond repair because of poverty and joblessness.

I have always believed that securing human rights is a struggle, and that struggling is honorable, and that passive disobedience can be honorable. Archbishop Tutu recently drew a close parallel between the fight against apartheid and addressing the problem of fossil fuels. We need a popular movement that embraces the interconnected issues of human rights, gender, development, and climate justice. A better world rooted in human dignity and human rights is not only necessary, it is possible.

About the Interviewee



Mary Robinson is the former President of Ireland (1990-1997) and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997-2002). Before acceding to the presidency, she was a senator in the Irish Parliament from 1969 to 1989, where she championed gender equality. In 2002, she founded Realizing Rights: The Ethical Global Initiative, an NGO that worked to position human rights standards at the heart of global governance and policymaking. In 2010, she founded the Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice, whose mission is to make justice and equity a centerpiece of the global response to climate change and to give voice to affected poor and vulnerable communities. In 2013, she was appointed the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region of Africa.

About the Publication

Published as an Interview by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).



Cite as Mary Robinson. "Human Rights in the Age of Climate Change," interview by Allen White. *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2014).

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As a forum for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.