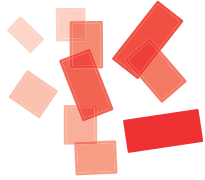


**PROGRESSIVE
YEARBOOK 2020**





BIG ISSUES

Let's not burn our future

Mary Robinson

Climate has been a vocal and key issue throughout 2019, namely thanks to grassroots movements such as Fridays for Future. It will continue to be so for many years to come, as more political action is being demanded by citizens. This chapter focuses on the different and necessary tracks for action (at the United Nations, national and personal levels) but also advocates an essential change in political mindsets. As the problem is a global one, it calls for global solutions – all scientific reports on climate and nature back this up. However, global solutions can only flourish if there is real solidarity amongst nations. This is about a different vision of society but also a different future – one that must include a liveable planet for all and that leaves no one behind.

2019 was a remarkable year for the fight for Climate Justice – especially with the Fridays for Future movement, where millions of children and supporting adults called humankind out. I can only join their bold and clear messages about the future of our planet. They have rightfully criticised all past generations about the reckless exploitation of our planet and its resources, and about the toxic legacy left behind by climate-denier global leadership. Highlighting the intergenerational injustice of our failure to deal with climate change, these young people are accusing us of potentially destroying their future. Their short and direct message resonates loudly in the highest spheres of power. As Greta Thunberg said in Davos: “Our house is on fire and all you care about is money!”

Just before the UN Climate Summit in New York, the Elders,¹ whom I have the honour to chair, issued a press release on 24 September,² in solidarity with young people and calling for “critical climate action”. It urged leaders to listen to the children, to take responsibility – pleading for a voice. Not just for schoolchildren who can and are now using their voices, but for future generations that could be the most affected of all. And there is no voice at the UN system at the moment to make it clear that all our actions now have to be future-proof.

1 The Elders are an independent group of global leaders, founded in 2007 by Nelson Mandela, working together for peace, justice and human rights.

2 The Elders (2019), *World leaders risk climate catastrophe with warm words and no action*, Press Release, 24 September. Available at: <https://www.theelders.org/news/world-leaders-risk-climate-catastrophe-warm-words-and-no-action>.

Scientific evidence and existing framework

Every day the news on climate change gets worse. On 11 May 2019, scientists at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii, which has tracked atmospheric CO₂ levels since the late 1950s, detected 415.62 parts per million. The last time Earth's atmosphere contained this much CO₂ was more than 3 million years ago, when global sea levels were several metres higher. So we are not talking any more about 'climate change', we are using the words 'climate crisis', 'climate emergency' or 'climate breakdown', and we have to inject this sense of real emergency. But we do not have to reinvent the wheel – we have scientific evidence to back it up.

In 2015, being in the front seat of the negotiations as Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations for Climate Change, I was given the opportunity to observe how agreements came into being. During September, 193 countries negotiated the 2030 Agenda with the 17 Development Goals. It was a good package, maybe particularly good because countries knew when they were negotiating that it was voluntary – they could pick and choose. Exactly because of this voluntary nature of approach, they were able to come to a consensus in New York.

High expectations and hard work were directed towards the Paris Agreement – which was supposed to take the shape of a treaty. However, as it got weaker as negotiations went forward, one should not forget the inestimable contribution of the small island states, the least developed countries, the Climate Vulnerable Forum, Indigenous Peoples, all of whom worked very hard to keep the 1.5°C target alive and become one of the agreement's key achievements. The need to stay well below 2°C was evident and working towards 1.5°C was greatly supported by scientific evidence.

This evidence is clearly supported by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) special report on global warming,³ whose main message sounds an alarm bell when it illustrates the great difference between 1.5°C and 2°C, and that at more than 2°C we risk eroding our chances of a future on a liveable planet. This difference would put at risk our economies, our health, our access to water, breathable air, food security and, ultimately, human security.

The second report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) focused on the impact that a rise in temperature would have on nature and its ecosystems. Its gloomy conclusions are that such a rise would lead to a disastrous loss of biodiversity⁴ and the potential extinction of 1 million species. For example, coral reefs would probably disappear, the Arctic ice would more or less disappear, and the permafrost would melt at a higher pace than that at which it is already melting and emit not just carbon but methane – which is much more dangerous.

3 IPCC (2019), *Global Warming of 1.5 °C*, Special Report, October. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

4 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (2019), *Report of the Plenary of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services on the work of its seventh session*, May. Available at: https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/ipbes_7_10_add.1_en_1.pdf.

Time for action and solidarity

As a consequence of the scientific evidence, we can no longer afford to regard the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement as voluntary, as pick and choose, and as a matter for each member state to decide on their own. Instead, science has made it clear that the full implementation of both has become imperative in order to secure a liveable world. This requires a change of mindset at the global level, meaning that governments that have been reporting on a voluntary basis to the high-level political forum on the goals that are set out, have to do it more seriously and inform their citizens about the measures adopted. We should not have reporting by governments on sustainable development goals without citizens being completely informed about this. This would mean that leaders would be held accountable at home and also at the UN.

In addition to this, we need to increase the ambition of the nationally determined contributions (NDCs). While it is common knowledge that action needs to be taken, little information is being shared with communities about their government's pledges. We have to make this much more significant in people's minds because, according to the IPCC report,⁵ we need a 45% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. This is doable if we have the political will. It is unfortunate that COP 25, which took place in Madrid in December 2019, did not live up to its expectations, particularly because – in spite of gaining some traction – it missed the opportunity to early ratify the Escazú Agreement⁶ for Latin America and the Caribbean. This would have signalled strong political will. In Madrid, leaders came short of a firmly unified position ahead of COP 26, which will take place in Glasgow in November 2020.

Yet with carbon emissions steadily going up, we no longer have the luxury of time and slow electoral cycles. We have to vow to make the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement imperative, binding, measurable and enforceable.

This is the reason why I join my voice to the growing climate justice movement, calling for a Just Transition – as reflected in FEPS's guiding proposals⁷ – for a political change of mindset

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5 IPCC, op. cit.

6 United Nations ECLAC, *Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Available at: https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43583/1/S1800428_en.pdf.

7 Billingham, C. (ed), (2019), *UNited for Climate Justice – Declaration with guiding proposals for Progressive Climate Action*, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, August. Available at: <https://www.fepeurope.eu/resources/publications/692-united-for-climate-justice-declaration-with-guiding-proposals-for-progressive-climate-action.html>.

that will give rise to a world with clean energy and climate actions that fully respect human rights, and that must not leave anyone behind.

We shall not neglect the future of workers of coal, gas and oil, or the futures of the 1 billion people who still lack electricity, or of the 2.3 billion – mainly women – who cook with charcoal, wood, peat or animal dung, ingesting indoor air pollution that kills millions each year. We have the technical know-how (off-grid lights, mini -systems, clean cookstoves) that can transform the lives of a significant part of our world and enable these people to take themselves out of poverty. Prioritising and reaching the furthest behind, first has to become a systematic approach.

With this aim, I believe that all of us, should commit to the following three crucial steps:

- Make climate change a personal issue in our lives and act in order to reduce consumption emissions (e.g. energy conservation, better recycling) or change our eating habits (by becoming a pescatarian as I did, for example).
- Then, get angry and act on it. Get angry with those who have much more power but are not using it, and who are not being responsible – meaning on all levels, including cities, towns, businesses (especially fossil fuel businesses, agribusiness, transport). Then step into the action by using your voice and your vote along with supporting organisations involved in conservation issues or climate change advocacy. This will also help with an issue that I have seen in many young people called 'climate anxiety'.
- The third step is probably the most important, yet less spoken about. Indeed, it requires us to imagine the world we must be hurrying towards. We have no more than a decade to get the bending of the curve down by 45%. We have to fight for a much healthier world (without the air and the water pollution of fossil fuels) but also for a more equal one. With the 2030 Agenda implemented, everyone would have access to clean energy, and our economies would become circular as we consume less and value more. In addition to this, we would value and create a world of deeper relationships at all levels, living in solidarity.

A feminist approach

Climate change is a man-made problem and as such it requires a feminist solution. And what I mean by that is that man-made is a generic approach, it includes all of us and a feminist solution definitely includes as many men as possible. That is why I applaud women leaders

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all across the world who have stepped forward in a more pre-eminent way than in the past, taking great responsibility and wanting to be involved on all levels of government. So how do we get that sense of political will and global solidarity? I believe that the answer can be found in a radically different societal approach: feminism. Because a feminist solution is based on equality, it is a different way of ordering our economies. It is a different approach altogether if we conduct a true feminist solution.

Rising to the challenge of addressing climate change can be truly transformative, and to achieve the commitment of the 2030 Agenda, to leave no one behind can truly be an opportunity. But it can only be a successful one if one encourages and fosters more initiatives bringing people together, advocating a common cause (like Amnesty, Green Peace, 350.org and also faith-based, and indigenous, groups).

Business joining in the fight

Working with The B Team⁸ of business leaders, I have witnessed how business and future-proof investments make a positive impact. The B Team have committed their companies to have net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and do it the climate justice way by a Just Transition. They committed actually *before* Paris, and they continue to work together.

We have entered a new reality where fossil fuel companies are losing legitimacy and licenses to operate. If governments are to retain their own legitimacy and trust amongst citizens, this means they must end all fossil fuel subsidies – in all forms – so that coal and other hydrocarbons are kept in the ground, and resources are invested instead in clean renewable energy sources and green technologies.

For this reason, I believe that business leaders must also speak up for a regular trade environment that protects all human rights – a trade environment that holds business leaders accountable for their actions, the same way as governments. Business leaders must do more to make themselves more visibly accountable and transparent about their activities, communicating about their roles in partnerships to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. We do not want bogus excuses. We want genuine commitment and genuine climate action from all sectors of society

Conclusion

As Pope Francis said, addressing the Second Vatican Energy Transition Dialogue:

“The meeting has been focused on three interrelated points: first, Just transition; second, carbon pricing; and third, transparency of reporting climate risks. These are three immensely complex issues and I commend you for taking them up. Dear friends, time is running out, deliberations must go beyond mere explorations of what can be done and concentrate on what needs to be done. We do not have the luxury of waiting for others to step forward or of prioritising economic benefits. Climate action requires decisive action here and now, and the Church is fully committed to playing its part”.

This is, in my opinion, an admirable example of leadership that needs to feed and strengthen the climate justice movement. We need more engaged leaders ready to speak up and take part in action.

8 The B Team is a group of global business and civil society leaders working to confront the current crisis of conformity in leadership. More information available at: <https://bteam.org/who-we-are/mission>.

To conclude, I would like to thank the children and the young people who have called us out. I would like to thank them for making their voices heard, starting with Greta Thunberg – but also all the other children and young people. Thanks to their perseverance, their peaceful protests all over the world, the Fridays for Future movement has taken to the streets to make sure that we indeed have a better future. Some time ago, I got a text with a picture of my two-year-old grandchild, named Zoe, in which she held a placard saying: “Do not burn my future”. And I thought: “That is it. That is the movement we want”.