

Climate Justice is Key to Addressing the Climate Crisis

By Mary Robinson

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Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be with you here this evening, for the first St. George's House Annual Lecture since 2019 and on the happy occasion of Her Majesty the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

Although we have all become familiar with and adept at using digital technologies in recent times, there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings and I look forward to a rich and stimulating conversation tonight.

My theme is climate justice, and why it is an indispensable concept, framework and guide for addressing the existential threat posed by the climate crisis.

Climate justice has been a priority in my public work for many years but its salience has increased significantly as a result of the intertwined crises our planet is currently enduring.

To understand this better, we need to acknowledge that our world has changed immeasurably over the course of the past three years.

The combined impact of the pandemic, the climate crisis, a brutal war on the continent of Europe and a fraying of the rules-based international order is being felt in every corner of the globe.

COVID-19 has claimed the lives of over 6 million people and untold numbers are still suffering the effects of their illness in unpredictable and destabilising ways.

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated inequalities between and within nations, with the poorest and most marginalised in society often bearing the heaviest brunt in terms of health, psychological and economic impacts.

Whilst we have witnessed remarkable feats of scientific endeavour and ingenuity in the rapid development of effective COVID-19 vaccines, we must also acknowledge a profound failure of politics, solidarity and coordination that has led to stark vaccine inequity: although 80% of people in higher and middle-income countries have received at least one dose, it is only 17% in low-income countries, predominantly in the Global South.

In the initial stages of the pandemic in Spring 2020, we heard many pious words from global leaders on the need to

come together and act with common purpose in the face of this new, indiscriminate, existential threat.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, sought to harness this resolve through his call for a “global COVID ceasefire”. Yet three years on, it is clear that leaders have failed to heed his call: from the coup and civil war in Myanmar, to the ongoing agonies of Syria and Yemen, the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan and, most egregiously of all, Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

And all the while, fresh scientific data continues to reveal the true extent of the climate crisis, the damage human activity has wrought on our planet and its ecosystems, and the relentlessly-closing window of opportunity that remains to prevent irreversible planetary catastrophe.

A common thread runs through these three disruptions: injustice.

It is profoundly unfair that people in Western Europe and North America have had three or maybe four COVID vaccinations by now when millions in Africa, Asia and Latin America have not even had one.

It is an offence unto international law and basic human decency that innocent Ukrainian civilians are being slain in their homeland on the orders of a Russian president in contempt of the UN Charter and the Geneva Conventions.

At the same time, the way the international community has reacted to Putin's invasion stands in contrast to its paralysis and passivity in the face of many other conflicts and violations of international law.

For too long, acts of aggression have been tolerated and unpunished by leading powers, including the permanent members of the UN Security Council, because the perpetrators are political or economic allies.

This is itself a profound injustice, resonant of historical hypocrisy and cynical realpolitik. I hope that the reaction to the war in Ukraine can herald a sea-change in global attitudes to ending impunity for war criminals everywhere.

Climate justice also challenges hypocrisy. It is a grave and worsening injustice that the impacts of climate change are felt the most by those people who are least responsible for rising carbon emissions and global temperatures.

Without justice, we will not have a fair, healthy and peaceful world. And without climate justice, we risk not even having a liveable planet for future generations.

Climate justice is a diverse concept reflecting the multiplicities and intersectionality of the climate crisis itself, but with a clear principle at its core. I identify five key layers of climate injustice:

Firstly, it has disproportionately affected the poorest countries, poorest communities, small island states and indigenous peoples of our planet;

Secondly, within that, it has exacerbated gender injustice. Women are too often excluded from and oppressed by decision-making bodies and institutions, meaning their perspectives are not heard when climate policies are debated – yet it is also women who are the ones building resilience in their communities;

Thirdly, there is the intergenerational injustice whereby young people and those not yet born may suffer the physical, material and psychological consequences of a wrecked climate because of the actions – and inaction – of their predecessors;

The fourth injustice is a subtle one. Industrialised countries built their economies on fossil fuel. Now our challenge – exemplified by the current war in Ukraine -- is to wean ourselves off coal, oil and gas far more quickly than we're doing and to provide a just transition for the workers that helped us to build our economies. And we need to support developing countries to bring themselves out of poverty in ways that help them to move to renewable energy but understand the immediate need to address energy poverty with an equitable transition.

Lastly, there is the injustice to nature herself. The oceans, forests, ice shelves and coral reefs that predate human existence and help sustain it today are at risk from our reckless behaviour, as is the wildlife we affect to love on television documentaries.

Delivering justice requires a concerted, holistic effort from all of us: governments, business, civil society, women's networks, youth, faith groups, trade unions, investors and ordinary members of the public.

In particular, it demands that we do not act in silos but acknowledge different perspectives and draw connections between seemingly remote experiences, whether this is the impact of war in Ukraine on food security in Zimbabwe, or droughts and famine in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere on that continent, leading more people to attempt perilous sea crossings in the Mediterranean to reach Europe's shores.

The climate crisis is not static, and a climate justice-driven response should not be either. We can see this clearly in the current debates on Europe's energy security and the political imperative to end our dependency on Russian oil and gas.

There is a clear moral, strategic and environmental reason to do so: this is a fossil-fuelled war, where the European Union, the United States and the United Kingdom have been buying over \$600 million dollars of Russian oil and gas

every day even as they also spend millions supplying Ukraine with vital military and humanitarian assistance.

In the rush to replace Russian fossil fuels, I hope that European governments – and I still very much include the United Kingdom as a European government in this context - will further accelerate the shift to renewable energy, rather than simply seeking alternative sources of fossil fuels.

Any increased use of Liquefied Natural Gas, coal and nuclear must be a strictly temporary measure, so as not to lock in long-term dependency.

Care must be taken to listen to African voices about the limited use of gas as a transition fuel for both clean cooking and wider purposes, but with a proviso it is time-bound and compatible with the goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change tells us that we have a vanishingly small window remaining to keep alive the target of restricting global temperature rises to 1.5°C as set out in the Paris Agreement.

There is no more space for new fossil fuel infrastructure - existing infrastructure alone will blow the 1.5°C target. Compared to their grandparents, at the current rate of predicted global warming it is projected that a child born

this year will live through seven times as many heatwaves, nearly three times as many droughts and twice as many wildfires.

Yet here again, the transition to renewables has climate justice implications that need to be understood holistically by a wide range of stakeholders far beyond the energy industry.

Clean-energy technologies such as solar plants, wind farms, and electric vehicles are mineral-intensive. Motors and turbines need nickel, chromium, manganese, and rare earths. New electricity networks require vast quantities of copper wire. Electric-vehicle batteries need lithium and nickel.

The International Energy Agency estimates that reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 will require a six-fold increase in mineral inputs, and a 40-fold increase in lithium supply.

This presents both an opportunity and a threat. The opportunity is for governments, investors, mining companies, and civil society organisations to come together to develop new investment models aimed at supplying a renewable energy revolution while building shared prosperity, public trust, and strengthened governance.

The threat is that we fail to protect the human rights of vulnerable communities in the transition-minerals boom,

with an investment surge instead fuelling the destruction of livelihoods, environmental damage, and a global wave of land and water grabs by multinational companies.

Mining companies, the wider extractive industry and its investors have a clear responsibility to be at the forefront of efforts to strengthen human rights protection.

This is a matter of climate justice just as much as it is good governance and responsible investment. And it builds on the vision of a dearly-missed friend, Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations and my predecessor as Chair of The Elders.

At the turn of the millennium, Kofi already perceived that globalisation entailed profound shifts in political and economic power, the balance of - influence between nation states and corporations, and the need for a new, inclusive approach to promote prosperity and human rights as two sides of the same coin.

In a speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos in 1999, Kofi outlined his plan for what has become the Global Compact, bringing together multinational corporations and the United Nations to work for the common good.

His words to business leaders still resonate today:

“You can uphold human rights and decent labour and environmental standards directly, by your own conduct of your own business.

Indeed, you can use these universal values as the cement binding together your global corporations, since they are values people all over the world will recognise as their own. You can make sure that in your own corporate practices you uphold and respect human rights; and that you are not yourselves complicit in human rights abuses.”

It is all too easy to pay lip service to these values, whether in the form of corporate mission statements, ministerial speeches or hashtags on social media.

Actually putting them into practice is a more arduous task requiring persistence and vigilance, especially in the face of short-term pressure points and the siren voices of political populism.

It is alarming, for example, to read the latest statement by BlackRock, the world’s largest asset manager, that it will vote against the majority of climate-related shareholder resolutions at upcoming corporate board meetings – including proposals to make banks align their business models to a 1.5°C scenario, and to direct companies’ lobbying activities around climate change.

Faced with the enormity and urgency of the climate crisis, this short-termism and self-interest is maddening.

But climate justice, like the great civil rights and emancipatory movements before it, is driven by hope just as much as by anger – and therein lies the key to its success.

Hope is a particularly precious quality to me in my current role as Chair of The Elders, because it reminds me of another dear, departed friend, Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In every context, “Arch” — as he always wished to be called — brought forth the South African concept of “ubuntu”, that shared sense of interdependent humanity that roughly translates as “I am because you are”.

But he also described himself as a “prisoner of hope”, which I still find the perfect metaphor for the persistent belief in the goodness of people and the capacity for change which is essential to deliver climate justice.

Speaking as an Elder, I have been particularly heartened to see how, in recent years, a groundswell of youth activists across the world have taken up the cause of climate justice, precisely because they want - and deserve - to have hope in their future.

Principled young women like Greta Thunberg, Vanessa Nakate and the British ornithologist Mya Rose Craig have

captured the world's imagination and earned popular admiration.

This has led to a situation where, in many countries, public attitudes to climate change and the need for radical structural reform to models of energy production and economic growth are ahead of governments' agendas and priorities.

I saw this on the streets of Glasgow last November during the COP26 climate summit, when people came together to demand urgent and radical action.

In the final analysis, COP26 fell short of what the people called for and what the world needs. Some progress was made in the Glasgow Climate Pact, but six months on this is looking increasingly fragile. Not enough leaders were in crisis mode last November – including the UK– and not enough of them are today.

This makes it all the more important that the drumbeat for climate justice continues and intensifies ahead of the next COP in Egypt this November. This will be an African COP, and African voices need to be heard from across the continent – which is the most vulnerable to climate change despite being responsible for just 4% of global carbon emissions.

It must advance African priorities, particularly climate adaptation, finance, loss and damage and a fair, equitable just transition

I have just returned from visits with The Elders to Rwanda and South Africa, where I heard directly from people on the front lines of Africa's climate crisis who are developing plans for a just energy transition.

In Rwanda, like many African countries, the challenge is to bring access to energy to those without.

In South Africa, the challenge is to transition away from coal in a way that leaves no one behind.

A bright spot at COP26 was the proposed deal between South Africa, the UK and others, to support a just transition away from coal in South Africa. It's now critical that international partners follow through with the promised finance, much of which should be grants not loans. The rest of the world is watching, and we cannot afford for this deal to fail. Got right, this could be a model for other emerging economies to raise ambition this decade.

What really struck me on my recent visit was the need for a people-centred, holistic approach that includes women and young people, who have been excluded for too long from the debates on their future.

Within women's networks, and youth networks, there is still an extraordinary amount of trust that is otherwise all too absent in the world right now. We need to empower these voices and harness their energy and commitment for the good of the whole planet.

At COP26, developed countries pledged to double adaptation finance by 2025 – which, if realised will increase support to vulnerable countries by billions. But the world has heard similar promises before which have never been realised, adding insult to the existing injustice.

Unless there is a major effort to drive the doubling of this adaptation finance commitment - starting now - it won't happen; that is why we need to see a clear roadmap by COP27, and why the UK has a particular responsibility to step up and ensure that the promises made in Glasgow are delivered upon.

One of the most significant areas of unfinished business from COP26 was on loss and damage, and specifically on a new financial mechanism whereby wealthy countries help with the costs of climate disasters in the developing world, such as rebuilding and rehoming communities after devastating floods, cyclones or fires.

The United States, backed by the European Union, postponed setting up this mechanism, but nations have nevertheless committed to talk further on this between

now and 2024, and the outcome of this dialogue must be a new fund.

Next week climate negotiators will meet in Bonn, Germany, to prepare for COP27, and as part of these negotiations they will hold their first “Glasgow Dialogue” on Loss and Damage finance.

I hope very much that this Glasgow Dialogue will be guided by the slogan by one of that city’s greatest modern writers, Alasdair Gray: *“Let Glasgow flourish by telling the truth.”*

We need to be crystal clear on this point: there can be no climate justice without climate honesty. Honesty about the science, honesty about the responsibility, honesty about the actions required and honesty about the speed with which we need to act.

This places a particular onus on leaders to act in good faith and with integrity to strengthen the institutions, cooperation and processes without which progress on climate action will be impossible.

People need to know that when their leaders sign a treaty, they will abide by their obligations under international law. This sends a signal to everyone else in society – in business, finance, research and the judiciary – that their government can be trusted and that they also have a responsibility to follow the same standards.

In the six months left before COP27, I hope that all leaders draw inspiration instead from the words of Nelson Mandela, the founder of The Elders and one of the greatest activists and statesmen I have ever had the privilege of knowing:

“Do not look the other way; do not hesitate. Recognise that the world is hungry for action, not words. Act with courage and vision.”

Thank you.

Mary Robinson is Adjunct Professor for Climate Justice in Trinity College Dublin and Chair of The Elders. She served as President of Ireland from 1990-1997 and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997-2002.