



DUTY TO PROTECT
Mary Robinson looks out for the planet's most vulnerable.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

We think of climate change as an environmental issue. But if those most responsible differ from those most affected, isn't it a human rights question as well?



AN INTERVIEW WITH
MARY ROBINSON
by Jocelyn C. Zuckerman

MARY ROBINSON HAS MADE IT her life's work to champion the underdog. Awarding her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009, Barack Obama called her "an advocate for the hungry and the hunted, the forgotten and the ignored." Robinson was the president of Ireland from 1990 to 1997 and then served for five years as the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. In 2002 she founded Realizing

Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative. Based at Columbia University in New York, the organization fostered equitable trade and decent work, promoted the right to health and humane migration policies, and encouraged women's leadership and corporate responsibility. Robinson spoke with *OnEarth* articles editor Jocelyn C. Zuckerman about how her new Mary Robinson Foundation—Climate Justice, based at Trinity College Dublin, hopes to address the challenge of climate change, which she calls the "biggest human rights issue of the twenty-first century."

What exactly is climate justice, and why did you establish this foundation?
I'd been working on the links between human rights and development, with a focus on Africa. We were particularly focusing on

the right to food and safe water, and I kept hearing, "Oh, but things have become so much worse" or "There are no seasons anymore" or "There's flooding where we didn't have flooding before." I became aware that the impacts of climate were really being felt by subsistence farmers, by people in low-lying slum areas. By the poorest, in fact, who were not responsible for it. So the foundation is aimed at achieving justice for those who are the poorest and most vulnerable to climate change.

Did the concept of climate justice grow logically out of a human rights framework?

For me it did, both the climate dimension and advocacy around the idea of justice, because the richer parts of the world have all benefited from carbon-based growth, and we have been, if I may say so, very profligate in our use of carbon. Until recently, we didn't understand that there was a limited carbon budget for the world. We have overused our potential allocation, while the poorest have not been using carbon to the same extent but now want to be able to develop. It's in our interest that this should be a low-carbon form of development. But they still have a right to development. So we need to ensure that, as we move to renewable energy, in order to mitigate the use of carbon, we provide access to low-carbon energy to the poorest. That will make people less dependent on development aid. It's a way of making them more productive, more able to raise themselves out of poverty.

What are the foundation's main priorities?

The first is to promote the principles of climate justice. And those principles include a very strong gender dimension, because when you're talking about poverty and making poor people

in vulnerable contexts—subsistence farmers, indigenous people—poorer, it's the women who bear the burden. And in my experience it's also the women who are the main agents of change.

You're based at a prestigious university. Where does education fit into the equation?

It's hugely important. We will be encouraging education at the primary level on the impacts of climate. In the more developed parts of the world that have benefited from carbon-based growth, we need to teach hab-

NRDC FOCUS

JAKE SCHMIDT
NRDC's international climate policy director, based in Washington, D.C.

Robinson talks about the role of the private sector in expanding access to green energy technology. What's your view of that?

The global deployment of clean energy technologies has skyrocketed in the past couple of years. Last year it reached \$243 billion. If that were a national economy, it would be the 30th largest in the world. The private sector sees huge benefits from investing in these technologies and is starting to convince governments and investors that renewables can compete with traditional fossil energy sources. The private sector has a vital role to play in spreading that message more widely.

For more of Schmidt's thoughts on international climate policy, visit onearth.org/schmidtqa

its of “reduce, reuse, recycle.” When I was in Bangladesh recently, I was taken by seaplane down to the delta areas that are so badly affected by sea surge and the salination of water and soil. The first thing we did was go to a local school, where they put on a play about how to respond to a cyclone. They began with a taller boy pretending to be a tree, and then children came and cut him down and others warned that they shouldn’t do that [because trees are a buffer against storms and flooding]. I was very impressed. Schools everywhere should be doing things like that.

What role is the private sector going to play?

It’s the private sector that’s leading on energy efficiency, on new technologies. I’m interested in developing a network of those who recognize that we need to ensure equity in this renewable energy debate, so that the poorest people will have access to affordable and renewable energy. The gadgets to do that exist. Battery-powered solar lights are on sale in India, and they also recharge mobile phones. If we can get these out to millions of people, then presumably the price will come down. And if we can get light into people’s homes, that will change the lives of women. They will become more productive, and their children will be educated, and it will have a whole development benefit.

Do you think a foundation like yours can do things that states or U.N. bodies can’t?

After I finished my term as High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2002, I wanted to show in a practical way that it makes a difference when you take human rights seriously in a development context. The idea of the foundation is to have a permanent entity that will build up expertise over the years. It’s something I wanted

to do from Ireland, partly because I wanted to be back and partly because I feel that Ireland can be a valuable bridge to the poorest countries on climate justice. We’ve come from poverty and famine ourselves, and we have a very good record on development aid. When I was president of Ireland, I can’t tell you the number of ambassadors, even from Muslim countries, who would make a point of telling me that they were educated in Irish-run schools—because those were the best.

You’ve talked about the importance of governments working together on these issues, but isn’t it in the nature of states to look out for their own interests?

Yes, I find that depressing, particularly at [the 2009 U.N. climate conference in] Copenhagen, which governments approached like a trade negotiation. But in an interesting way, technology is moving us beyond that, because there’s now a capacity to trace what countries are doing on carbon in a very visible way. Within a few years, for example, satel-

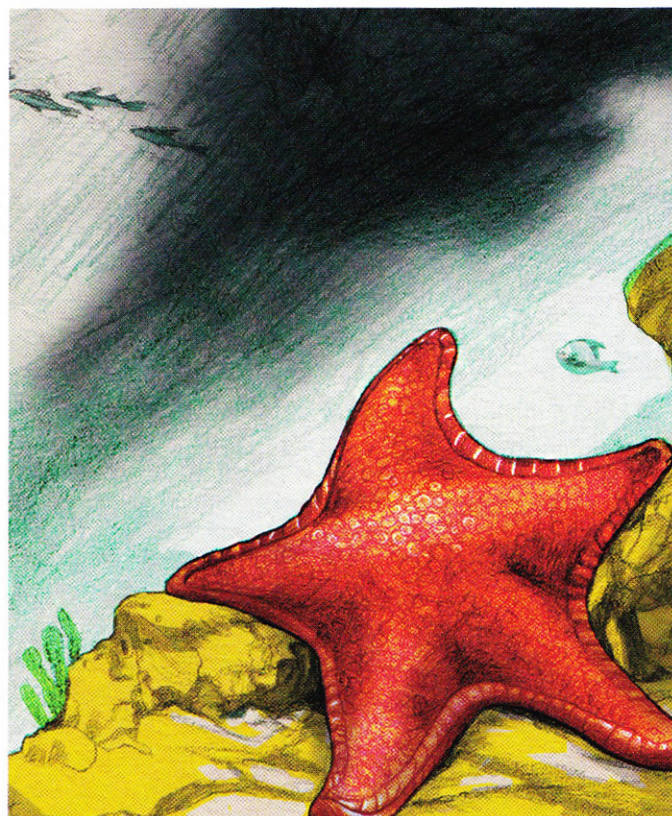
lite images will give us a much clearer picture of any country’s carbon footprint, and that will force governments into behaving with greater honesty and transparency.

So you see some fresh opportunities right now?

Yes. Psychologically things have changed. Going into Copenhagen, there was a lot of emphasis on the dire consequences if we didn’t get a fair, ambitious, binding agreement. It was kind of a doom-and-gloom argument, but since then I think the debate has shifted. I serve on the board of the European Climate Foundation, which is part of a broader organization called Climate Works. There’s a Climate Works in California, with counterparts in China and India, and a Brazilian foundation that will also be part of this wider network. We’re very much focused on the opportunities for renewable energy and the creation of green jobs. We’re putting forward a much more optimistic scenario.

Now that you have grandchildren of your own, are you hopeful about the world they’ll grow up in?

I think a lot about our grandchildren and the need to be more conscious that we are borrowing this earth from them. We all need to change our ways. I admit that I fly too much because I have to get to meetings, for example, but I’m trying to videoconference as much as possible. We’ve made our home more energy-efficient. What makes me especially hopeful is that I think young people get these things. There’s a new generation growing up around the world. In China, in India, in Bangladesh, and in Europe, there’s a real sense that the world is changing very significantly and that somehow we have to address the opportunities and the challenges. And young people seem to get that in a way I find very encouraging.



STARFISH BLUES

EVERY DAY, A BILLION GALLONS OF WASTEWATER AND STORM water flow from California into the ocean, bringing along heavy metals, pharmaceuticals, pesticides, and other contaminants. Researchers at the University of Hawaii recently found that populations of organisms like the bat star, which live virtually free of direct human impact, are in fact directly affected by the plume. In a paper published in March, Rob Toonen and Jonathan Puritz explained that the contaminated water acts as a barrier to the starfish larvae, effectively reducing gene flow between populations and threatening the species’ long-term survival. Out of sight, yes, but this study suggests we’d do better to keep our waste in mind. —ROSE EVELETH