

## Mary Robinson: 'climate justice' must play a key role in the Paris Agreement

Written by The Conversation USA

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*Mary Robinson, the first female president of Ireland, gave a speech in Melbourne on March 15. Robinson, who served between 1990 and 1997, has since gone on to play an active role in international climate negotiations.*

*As special envoy on climate change to the UN Secretary-General, Robinson negotiated with world leaders ahead of the successful Paris climate summit in December 2015.*

*Through her work on climate change Robinson is an active proponent of “climate justice”, which advocates sharing the burden of mitigating and adapting to climate change between all parts of society, and particularly between developed and developing nations.*

*In Melbourne she addressed the growing role of climate justice in climate talks and in bringing the Paris Agreement into force. The following is a summary of Robinson’s key points.*

### **Climate justice no longer just for NGOs**

In 2011 in Durban, South Africa, a new negotiating group was established to begin deliberations on a climate agreement to begin after 2020.

At that time, “climate justice” sat squarely in the remit of non-governmental organisations but was not used in official discussions.

Four years later, at the Paris climate conference, the call for climate justice was brought inside the walls of the negotiations. It is even included in the preamble to [the official Paris Agreement](#)

As Robinson put it:

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climate justice is no longer a narrative only used by civil society. It is now part of the lexicon of at least 24 world leaders, eight business organisations and 27 countries.

According to the [Mary Robinson Foundation](#), climate justice “links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach” to climate change action.

It is the concept that fairness must be an integral and driving element of climate decision-making.

### Is climate justice reflected in the Paris Agreement?

A commonly cited criticism of the Paris Agreement is that it relies on the use of under-developed [negative emissions technologies](#) and thus may be unrealistically ambitious.

However, elements of the Paris Agreement are encouraging.

On diplomacy, Robinson highlighted the important work that many and diverse actors undertook in the lead-up to the Paris conference. She also saluted the efforts of French diplomacy, which avoided diluting the participation of poorer countries.

She heralded the creation of a coalition that managed to secure a tightened global warming target of 1.5°C, a [critical issue for many low-lying countries](#) :

Presidents and senior ministers from the small island states could not come back from Paris without [an agreement featuring a target of] 1.5°C, because they would be committing national suicide.

On science, Robinson conceded that the Paris Agreement does not deliver what the science demands. If all emissions reduction efforts pledged by all nations are fully implemented, the

world is still on track for more than 2°C.

However, she stressed that the agreement is informed by the science and will be reviewed and upgraded in response to science, referring to the legally binding requirement that all countries periodically review and revise their pledges — there can be no backsliding.

On law, Robinson emphasised the need for transparency and accountability to enable oversight by government, civil society and citizens. What Paris has delivered is a legally binding pathway, but this is only part of the puzzle. National legislation will be required to ensure that the agreement is actually implemented.

According to [a study by the Grantham Institute](#), this is already in train. In the 99 countries surveyed in the study, there were 54 national laws and policies directly related to climate change mitigation and adaptation in 1997. By 2009 that number had climbed to 426. By 2014, it had almost doubled to 804.

### **Building an agenda through climate justice**

However, climate laws and policies have not always been positively linked to human rights. In many cases, climate policies have been harmful to local communities. For example, corn ethanol policies have in the past driven up food prices in Mexico and other parts of Central America.

For climate justice to inform how the Paris Agreement is implemented there needs to be a special focus on the Sustainable Development Goals and the right to development for all countries. According to [research from the Mary Robinson Foundation](#), zero carbon and zero poverty are complementary goals.

Developing countries are where much climate action needs to take place, but for low-carbon transformation these countries need access to finance:

It is our responsibility but it is also in our collective self-interest to help developing countries transition.

There is also a need for access to information and participation. According to Robinson, a participatory approach shouldn't be just because it's right but because it works.

The Paris climate talks may have been such a success because there was an inclusive space for all voices to be heard. This needs to happen at all levels, internationally, nationally and sub-nationally. She cited the now non-profit Australian Climate Council (formerly the government-initiated Climate Commission) as a model for this sort of participation.

### **Tasks for Australia**

According to Robinson, Australians have some homework to do after the Paris conference.

The first is to get ourselves into a 1.5°C mindset. We need a research agenda that explores what it means to limit warming to 1.5°C. Australia, like many developed countries, still has a 2°C mindset.

The second is to begin shaping the rules. Legal scholars need to determine how we integrate transparency, accountability and justice into the rules of law.

The third is to ensure that Australia ratifies the Paris Agreement on April 22 in New York. The treaty does not come into force until 30 days after it has been ratified by at least 55 countries representing at least 55% of global emissions.

The fourth is to accelerate a transition to renewable energy.

The fifth and final task is to attend to a marriage between the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. Together these agreements forge a pathway to 2030 and

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beyond.

According to Robinson:

Nobody is pretending that the job to 2050 will be easy but Australia is a country with a can-do attitude; a country where people get involved and where communities thrive. You, in Australia, are lucky. You could be world leaders in emissions reduction because you have the benefits of renewable energy technology.

*Mary Robinson spoke at the [inaugural Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute \(MSSI\) address on March 15, 2016.](#)*

*Anita Talberg receives an Australian Postgraduate Award PhD scholarship*

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