



Skoll World Forum Opening Plenary: Fierce Compassion

Mary Robinson Keynote address: A milestone for humanity and vision for the future

13th April 2016 1:45 pm – 3:15 pm, New Theatre, Oxford

As a student in the US in the 1960s I witnessed the fierce compassion of the civil rights movement. The joining of hands, the meeting of minds and the braving of hearts inspired me. Like so many others I was moved by the struggle in Oxford Mississippi, a pivotal moment in the civil rights struggle in the US.

In 1962, an African-American student's plans to enrol at Oxford sparked the Battle of Oxford. Before the battle was over, federal troops were on site, hundreds were injured and tragically, two people had died. But, James Meredith was finally able to go to school.

Climate justice, which is the subject of my own fierce compassion now, has been described by civil rights activist Jibreel Khazan, one of the Greensboro Four, as the "lunch counter moment" for the 21st century. He also says of climate change that "it is the biggest threat to justice and opportunity our planet has ever seen".

I, too, believe that climate change is the biggest threat to humanity of the 21st century. The impacts of climate change on people's lives and their enjoyment of their human rights are what brought me to the issue of climate change. Climate change is not just an issue of

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atmospheric science; it is also about human rights, and this is what continues to motivate me to find urgent and fair global responses to the climate crisis.

Which is why I was so emotional when the gavel fell on the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement has been hailed as historic which it is. The emotion that flooded through the COP venue as it was adopted was incredible. People clapped and hugged and cried. They did so because whether they were a government minister, a trade union activist, a negotiator, the leader of an endangered small island state or a social entrepreneur – they had invested so much of themselves in securing the Agreement. And beyond the COP venue, millions of people felt part of the outcome, they saw their efforts reflected in the text of the Articles. This broad ownership will be the key to turning those words into practical actions.

Securing a universal and legally binding agreement by over 190 countries - to end the fossil fuel era in this century through cooperative action – is historic. Prioritising the most vulnerable people as we forge this path is what can deliver climate justice.

2015 was a significant year for multilateralism - not just because of the Paris Agreement – but also because of Agenda 2030, adopted last September in New York. It commits all members of the United Nations to 17 Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. These goals cut across every sector of the economy and will benefit every part of society. They aim to reach the furthest behind first, and leave no one behind, as the world makes the transition to sustainability over the next 15 years.

Since the 1st January the SDGS are now the domestic agenda of all countries – rich and poor. They are a global agenda that changes how we do business, and there is a role for social entrepreneurs in reaching every single one of them; from universal access to clean energy and gender equality to ending hunger and creating peaceful and inclusive societies. I realise I am speaking to many of you who are already part of the fossil free future that the Paris Agreement aspires to. I know that many of you are engaged in addressing issues of inequality - whether it be in delivering energy to power development, addressing women's rights or children's education - and you are doing it in a way that is getting beyond better. But I want you to work fiercer! You have to get into a 1.5 degree frame of mind. Before and

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during the Paris Agreement the private sector called on the governments of the world to give them the signal to move on climate change – whether that would be divesting from fossil fuels and investing in renewables or otherwise. Well, the Paris Agreement is the signal.

And the next step for the Paris Agreement is ratification and then implementation. Again this is where you have a role to play.

Even if the plans countries have prepared as part of the Paris Agreement are implemented in full we will still be heading for a 3oC warmer world. This would be catastrophic. So the actions of social entrepreneurs around the world can help to make up the short fall needed to be on course to a well below 2oC and heading for a 1.5oC world. Achieving the 1.5oC goal means carbon neutrality by 2050. That means leaving two thirds of the known fossil fuel reserves in the ground, massive investments in forestry and better land management to enhance carbon sinks. These are all actions you are already taking – so let's do it quicker and fairer. By future proofing every decision we make, we can live within planetary boundaries while ensuring a life free from poverty and full of opportunity for all.

The Paris Agreement creates new responsibilities for every one of us. Developing countries have taken on additional responsibilities as part of the Agreement - and if they are not supported to deliver on the leadership they are prepared to give – trust in the international process will be severely eroded. We need to implement climate action to build resilience, and promote low carbon development in a way that allows the benefits to be shared equally. So, we need to be fierce and bold – but we also need to be compassionate and caring.

We need compassion for those most affected by and least responsible for climate change – they are suffering the injustice of climate change every day through water and food shortages, extreme weather events and the loss of livelihoods. We need fierce determination to protect the planet, to save lives and to build a low carbon society that brings the benefits of electricity, transport, enough food and safe water to everyone.

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Addressing climate change is not something we can do alone – it requires a global effort and a realisation that it is in our collective self-interest to take action. Fierce compassion cannot be delegated – it must be personal. Fierce compassion is for you as social entrepreneurs, for faith leaders, heads of state, CEOs, civil society leaders, mayors and parliamentarians. It must be owned and channelled as a force into the actions that each of us takes every day.

Without compassion a fierce approach to climate action could be dangerous. Rapid climate action, taken purely to reduce greenhouse gas emissions risks, could place vulnerable people at more risk. If people in vulnerable situations are not consulted, if their rights are not respected, and if they are forced to shoulder an unfair burden through the loss of land, natural resources or cultural heritage – the injustice they live with already will be compounded.

This is why I focus on justice - believe me I am not just trying to make something already complicated be even more complicated!

At any time of transition we need to take care that the burdens and benefits of that transition are shared equitably. This is where compassion is critical.

We need compassion for those employed in the fossil fuel sector, like the coal miners who will lose their jobs when we stop burning coal. They need to be treated fairly and assured of income security for their families.

We need compassion for those living day to day on the frontlines of climate change– like Ursula Rakova who has relocated her community from the Carteret Islands to mainland Papua New Guinea – but who mourns leaving the land that holds the bones of their ancestors. Women, too, like Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner and Selina Leem, who are using their voices to protect the future of their home, the Marshall Islands. They need fairness, protection and compassion in the face of the potential loss of their heritage, their culture and their homes.

We need compassion for those living without electricity and clean cooking, like Constance Okellet and those in her village in eastern Uganda – they need to be part of the renewable energy revolution and not left behind, as they have been by fossil fuel based growth.

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You can help. Many of you are already doing so and I want to encourage you further. You can make sure that as the cost of renewable energy falls and investment in clean energy increases – you use your influence, your business and your resources to reach those furthest behind first. You need to have them top of your mind – the 1.3 billion people without electricity and the 2.6 billion still cooking on open fires. Implementing the Paris Agreement and the SDGs with fierce compassion – means reaching these people, many of them women, first.

We can lift people out of poverty while we take climate action. We can address inequality through a well-designed zero carbon revolution. And we can protect people's rights by supporting them to be resilient and to manage the impacts of climate change.

But we can only do this IF we make a conscious effort to have fierce compassion motivate our actions.

We have seen in the past how poorly designed biofuels policies, or hydroelectric dams, have undermined people's rights and led to conflict.

On the other hand, climate action designed with fierce compassion to deliver climate justice, will improve lives and provide opportunity for all.

So,

Be fierce – be part of the transition to zero carbon, climate resilient development – it has started, help to accelerate it. If we don't deliver on the promise of Paris, the contract already entered into with the most climate vulnerable countries and communities - we will lose momentum, break promises and the agreement could flounder. Time is of the essence – every month and year counts – the sooner we act the less costly it will be – not just in dollars, but in lives.

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Be compassionate - make sure the support you provide is guided every step of the way by human rights and gender equality. A concern for human dignity needs to be at the centre of every climate action. Make sure you enable the active and equal participation of men and women from start to finish, and be as transparent and accountable as you are determined and brave.

My five grandchildren will be in their 40's in 2050, and concern for the world they will live in is what gets me out of bed every day. If we fail to act decisively on climate change, then extreme weather and conflicts for food, water and even a place to live, will mean misery for the 9 billion people sharing the planet in 2050. But if each one of us channels our fierce compassion, and uses the resources we have available to us, we can shape a world that is fairer and better than the one we inherited

There is no time to lose. We need to link fierce compassion with that phrase of Doctor Martin Luther King Junior - 'the fierce urgency of now'.

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