

## Foreword

MARY ROBINSON

I AM DELIGHTED to welcome this special issue of the *Health and Human Rights Journal*, dedicated to exploring a subject matter extremely close to my heart—climate justice.

In recent years, climate justice is emerging as a discipline that addresses the interlinked challenges of climate change, human rights, and development. At a time when the need for multidisciplinary research is gaining ground, climate justice provides a useful framing for interdisciplinary collaborations.

Climate justice highlights the impacts of climate change on the vulnerable, marginalized, and poor, who are disproportionately affected by extreme weather events, such as floods, storms, and droughts, and slow onset events, such as sea level rise and glacial melt. They are the people who have their homes destroyed, face increasing struggles to feed themselves and their families, and are more susceptible to diseases while having their access to health care diminished.

Climate change is already undermining many of their basic human rights—to food and water, to shelter and health. Climate justice points out that the undermining of these essential rights is an injustice—largely because those who are most affected by the negative impacts are least responsible for the causes of the problem. The concept shows how global development issues and climate change are inextricably linked, as for example when the incidence of a disease like malaria, that we have been making progress on eradicating, starts to rise again due to climatic changes.

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I first came to climate change through my work on human rights, when I realized that if we don't equitably and ambitiously tackle the onslaught of global warming, we can never reach a world where global development goals can be achieved and rights protected and respected.

The Mary Robinson Foundation–Climate Justice believes that both the climate change negotiations and the post-2015 development agenda must work hand-in-hand to achieve a sustainable future. With a shared deadline of 2015 for both frameworks, this year and next provide a unique opportunity for global policy makers to take transformative action and come to an agreement which ensures future generations are not faced with an inhospitable planet and a climate with unimaginable consequences for humankind.

When our health is at risk, we act. We don't wait until the tumor grows larger or our bodies become weaker. Medical professionals work quickly because they know that, in an emergency, every second counts. I firmly believe that climate change is now the greatest single emergency of our lifetimes. Future generations are depending on us taking urgent, immediate action for their livelihoods. Climate justice senses this urgency, and aims to push leaders across the world to take decisive, radical action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for the sake of the health and well-being of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The scale of this emergency has recently been detailed in the Fifth Assessment reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In particular, the Working Group II report issued in March 2014 outlined the impacts of climate change on people. Global leaders continuing the 'business as usual' approach will bring us to a four degrees Celsius warmer world with dire consequences for the health and human rights of the world's most vulnerable citizens.

The report of Working Group II of the IPCC states with high confidence that global warming has exacerbated health problems which already

exist in our world. As this century continues, the IPCC expects climate change to lead to increases in ill health in many regions, as compared to a planet without the impacts of climate change. Examples include greater likelihood of injury, disease, and death due to more intense heat waves and fires; increased likelihood of under-nutrition resulting from diminished food production in poor regions; risks from lost work capacity and reduced labor productivity in vulnerable populations; and increased risks from food- and water-borne diseases.

The report also clarifies that while people all over the world are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, the poor and marginalized are the most vulnerable. With this in mind, I believe that the world needs to respond with a climate justice approach to shape a global response that is rights-based in its actions to lower emissions and build resilience.

All too often, it is women who are most at risk from the impacts of climate change on health. The report of Working Group II of the IPCC reveals that vulnerable groups, including women, will experience adverse effects on their health due to the impacts of climate change.

It finds that regions of Africa with little financial resources, inadequate public health and health care systems, insufficient access to safe water and sanitation, food insecurity, and poor governance will be most affected by climate-induced health issues. Poor populations in rural areas are most vulnerable to climate-induced health issues, and factors that increase vulnerability include inadequate or no mosquito protection and limited access to health care facilities offering effective diagnostic testing and treatment.

In Asia, more frequent and intense heat waves will increase mortality and morbidity in vulnerable groups. In addition, increases in heavy rain and temperature will increase the risk of diarrheal diseases, dengue fever, and malaria. Increases in floods and droughts will exacerbate rural poverty

in parts of Asia due to negative impacts on some crops, such as rice, resulting in increases in food prices with associated effects on nutrition.

The IPCC report also states that Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly vulnerable to climate change's effects on nutrition; 26.8% of the region's population was already undernourished in 2010-2012, a number that climate change will likely increase. If we accept that health risks such as malnutrition are rooted in political and cultural inequalities that lead to poverty and the disempowerment of women, we also accept that malnutrition is a rights issue and a good proxy indicator for development. Rural women are highly dependent on subsistence agriculture to feed their families; however, their access to natural resources such as land, water, and food is often limited. Discrimination, resulting from laws or social norms and customs, and lower levels of access to education (among other factors), restrict women's access to credit, agricultural inputs, technologies, and services like health care.

It is the opportunities that climate justice creates in achieving an equitable and transformative agreement for our planet's climate and sustainable development which makes this special issue of the *Health and Human Rights Journal* so significant. The papers in this publication are hugely beneficial in how they contribute to our knowledge and understanding of climate justice, while providing their own take on the radical solutions necessary for a safe and secure world for future generations.

I would like to explore two key aspects of climate justice that are addressed by the articles in this special issue: 1) the impacts of climate change on the right to health; and 2) the impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups.

### The impacts of climate change on the right to health

Human rights are at the core of a climate justice approach. 'Respect and Protect Human Rights' is a principle of climate justice, highlighting the value of the international rights framework in supplying the legal imperatives with which to frame morally appropriate responses to climate change, rooted in

equality and justice.

Articles in this special issue examine the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups, including indigenous peoples. A case is made for climate change mitigation policies informed by human rights and with clear health and equity co-benefits. The links between climate justice and the right to health are presented, including an analysis of the links between the right to food and the right to health in the context of increasing dependency on food aid of low nutritional value. Several papers present a strong case for human rights law guiding procedural responses to climate change and its negative impacts on health.

### The impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups

Climate justice has a focus on protecting the vulnerable, respecting their human rights, and ensuring that they have equitable access to the benefits of climate responses. There has not been enough emphasis on vulnerable communities to date in discussions on climate change and the voices of the vulnerable, and their solutions need to be heard and acted upon. A number of the papers in this special issue highlight the impacts of climate change on the health of vulnerable groups.

Articles in this special issue explore the vulnerability of people in disaster and post-disaster situations to negative impacts of climate change on their health, demonstrating how inequitable land tenure and urbanization processes increase exposure to climate risk. The particular vulnerability of children and future generations is also highlighted, advocating that the Convention on the Rights of the Child be used to advance intergenerational climate justice.

Indigenous peoples, populations of small island developing states, and resource-poor urban communities in the developed countries, including the US, are also found to be particularly vulnerable to negative health impacts due to climate change.

In demonstrating the impacts of climate change on the right to health and the disproportionate effects on vulnerable groups, this special issue of

the *Health and Human Rights Journal* brings out strongly the injustice of climate change and the role of human rights norms in shaping equitable responses.

### Identifying solutions: The health benefits of clean energy

The authors move beyond highlighting the challenges to identifying solutions—ways to reduce the threat of an increasingly unpredictable climate on health and human rights. The papers demonstrate innovative ways of employing human rights law and instruments to protect rights and combat climate change—through procedural rights, norms, and a human rights-based approach; through linkages between UN instruments; and through linkages between disciplines as diverse as ecology, health, climate science, food aid, disaster management, and security.

Climate justice also embraces the need to share benefits and burdens associated with climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly. Renewable energy could bring enormous health benefits to around 3 billion people who continue to cook with traditional stoves and fuels such as coal, wood, or biomass. A figure that staggered me in March 2014 was the most recent estimate from the World Health Organization of 4.3 million deaths attributed to household air pollution each year; the figure rises to 7 million deaths if outdoor air pollution is added. These are preventable deaths, as we encourage access to clean cookstoves through the work of the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves and others, and switch rapidly from coal and other fossil fuels to renewable energy.

Imagine being able to change dramatically the life chances of almost half the population of the world with a disproportionate number being women, children, and the elderly! Climate justice is also about hope and opportunity from access to clean energy including the knowledge base of the Internet.

The report of Working Group III of the IPCC highlights the value of actions to mitigate climate change that have other socioeconomic co-benefits.

The reduction of carbon emissions can prevent the increase of poor health and disease due to negative climate impacts and preserve a clean and healthy living environment. Lower emissions means better air quality and more hospitable temperatures, both of which encourage more physical exercise, which has co-benefits such as fewer cases of illnesses like depression, osteoporosis, diabetes, obesity, heart problems, strokes, and some cancers. At a time when health services become more costly and less capable of handling increasing populations, a move towards a greener society can save money on health care while improving all-round well-being.

It is important at this juncture, with two international processes working on issues of human development and climate change coming to conclusion in 2015, that the value of a climate justice approach is demonstrated and used to inform these policy frameworks. This special edition is a welcome contribution to this endeavor.