



S5E7: Transcript Climate & Human Flourishing with Mary Robinson

Tavia Gilbert:

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm writer/producer Tavia Gilbert. Every first and third Tuesday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the art and science behind innovative tools that help human beings flourish, and this season, we hear from world experts about all facets of human flourishing.

So far this season, we've gone all over the map, from spirituality to happiness to the arts, but today, we're going global, with a conversation about a pursuit of well-being that impacts each and every one of us – climate health.

Today's guest is Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and the first woman to hold that elected office. Since Robinson's tenure as Ireland's President ended in 1997, she has continued to work tirelessly to promote gender equity, human rights, and, most recently and most intensively, climate justice. Robinson speaks passionately about the interdependence of people, animals, and the environment, and the imperative that we protect the health of each in order to ensure a sustainable future for world citizens and our planetary habitat.

As a global leader, Robinson relies on a skill she's developed not as a speaker or policy maker – though she has been successful at both. Perhaps her greatest ability is the one she's used to navigate the highest levels of international politics and social stewardship – listening.

Mary Robinson: I learned about the power of listening, first of all, when I was president of Ireland. I learned how important it was to travel around the country and go to poor areas, a community which had produced a community center that I would open – very small – and listen to them. Because that gave them the oxygen of more belief in their capacity to really help the community and help themselves. And I called it the kind of oxygen of listening to others.

Even more so when I was UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. I didn't have any big stick, I didn't have any way of compelling countries to comply with the treaty obligations they had voluntarily agreed to in protecting that people's rights. They weren't doing it, but I had no way of persuading them except to go listen to the voices of the victims of violations, and then help to get those voices out into Geneva, into the Human Rights Commission as it was at the time, into the world where power could be exercised in support of those victims.

And now, I love to listen to the incredible energy and innovation and entrepreneurship of these young climate activists, because it's not a one-way course. I learn as much as I maybe convey by being supportive and the way that I listen to them. But I think listening is a very powerful way of providing oxygen for people to breathe more deeply and find their way forward.

Tavia Gilbert: Robinson is the current chair of The Elders, an independent coalition of global leaders working together for peace and human rights, founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007. When she became a founding member of the Elders, her understanding about the importance of listening was further influenced by Mandela himself.

Mary Robinson: When Nelson Mandela came in, he told us, you are independent, you are free, you can speak, but you must do it, you must be humble. And you must listen, when you go into a community. Don't go in telling them what you feel they should do. They know more than you. They know what's good for their community, so listen, and help them to achieve what they want to achieve.

And he said, reach out to those who are marginalized, reach out to young people, reach out to women. And be independent, obviously, and be

supportive of peace. It was very powerful the way he said it. He repeated it again a few months later on his 89th birthday, when we were formally launched, at a ceremony on his 89th birthday. And from that moment on, as far as I was concerned, I was officially an Elder – I didn't feel as much an elder in those days, I'm quite comfortable now that people think of me as an elder because I've grown into it. [chuckles]

Tavia Gilbert: Along with other Elders, including former Prime Minister of Norway Gro Harlem Brundtland and anti-apartheid and human rights activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Robinson has learned that listening is active. It facilitates results that would otherwise not be possible.

Mary Robinson: You can't reform from the outside. Support and help and reform comes from within. And the more you can sit and listen – I sat with Archbishop Tutu and Gro Harlem Brundtland in a village in Ethiopia, in the Amhara region, where we listened to a whole village dealing with early child marriage. We saw girls who were already married on one side, out of school, we saw schoolchildren in front of us and the village on the other side with the Imam, there, the importance of the whole village being involved in how to tackle this problem. And our role was simply to listen and encourage, because that would get things done. But it was the village itself, embracing the idea that was going to make the difference.

Tavia Gilbert: Throughout her life, Robinson has listened to heads of state and heads of corporations. But even as she engages in international leadership responding to the accelerating climate crisis, she continues to embrace the opportunity to learn most and lead best by listening to people far younger than her 77 years – climate activists who have more at stake than any other constituents, young global citizens who impress upon her the urgency and impact of climate change.

Mary Robinson: Thanks to the young climate activists, we are now much more aware of the intergenerational injustice, that we're not planning things at the moment that will give young people a sense they may have a future at all. And certainly a future that may be much, much worse than now, where we're already suffering climate shocks. So that has been really important.

And I spend a lot of time with young climate activists. Yesterday, I was talking with three of them. One was from Zimbabwe, one was from a

small island in the Pacific, one was from the UK. Fourteen, 17-year-old, and a 20-year-old. We had a different conversation from the kind of conversation I used to have with my elders when I was growing up, and I made this point.

In my day, it was the one-way listening with respect to the elder imparting wisdom and knowledge. It's completely changed now. We had a real conversation, we exchanged, we talked about Covid, and the impact of Covid. We talked about climate anxiety, and they told me how they were coping with it. You know, it was a real intergenerational learning together, listening to each other, benefiting.

And that's what we have to have now in the climate discussions, frankly, in all discussions, because young people are smart, they're digitally connected, they're entrepreneurial, and they have a perspective of the future, which is much, much better for human resourcefulness and human survival.

Tavia Gilbert: Robinson's willingness to learn from the wisdom of young people is a natural extension of her decades of work listening to and learning from community leaders and advocating for the independence, rights, and dignity of all people, not just the privileged and powerful.

Mary Robinson: Human rights needs to embed in the culture of a country. But you have to be very careful when you say that. That doesn't mean that practices that are harmful, like early child marriage, or genital cutting, are culture. They're not. They're practices that are damaging, especially to children and girls.

But the embedding in a culture is embedding in the art and the history and the identity sense, and that's because the Universal Declaration in Article One says, we are all equal in dignity and rights. And I think we don't think enough about what dignity means. It's more to me about human flourishing. It's about the sense of self, the sense of self-worth, the opportunity that you think you have, the way in which you're encouraged to show your skills, etc., etc. And, you know, if you're lying in a doorway, homeless, and poor, and people pass you by without seeing you, it's very hard to have that dignity, as well as rights.

You know, we're all humans together. That's what Covid has really reminded us, our collective vulnerability. And that's why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was so important in 1948. It said, human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. And that was such a step forward for humanity.

And then countries signed up to treaties, they signed up to the reporters and special representatives of the Secretary General being able to visit countries on the human rights issues. But over and over again, they're trying to repress this and move back again. And it's so important that we retain that sense of what we've gained as human beings.

Tavia Gilbert: Robinson hasn't always been a climate activist. Her understanding of the importance of climate has developed over time.

Mary Robinson: I served for seven years from 1990 to 1997 as President of Ireland. I talked about the environment as we knew it at the time. But I didn't talk about climate change, because we didn't perceive it. But I'm now moving in the interest of sustainability, to extend, appropriately, that dignity and rights beyond humans, because I don't believe we will have human flourishing if we just focus on the humans.

Tavia Gilbert: As she calls for urgent action to safeguard climate health and sustainability, it is not a stretch for Robinson to now include all living beings as deserving of the right to a healthy, flourishing future. Her definition of human flourishing itself includes more than just human stakeholders, in part because she recognizes and embraces the wisdom and leadership of indigenous people and cultures.

Mary Robinson: Human flourishing is when we have equality, justice and human rights. But increasingly, it's not about humans alone. It's about how we live sustainably with the rest of nature.

And now we have to go further, and think of the dignity and rights of those who are more than human, beyond human. And I mean, not just animal and birds and fish species, but also the rivers and the air. I mean, the indigenous wisdom, that's what's going to help us in really living sustainably going forward.

Tavia Gilbert: Today, as a seasoned world leader, she is a passionate advocate for climate health, and shares what she has come to understand about climate – not just climate change, but climate justice.

Mary Robinson: I've now, over time, identified about five layers of injustice that require that we have a climate justice approach. And the first layer is that climate change affects disproportionately, much earlier, much more severely, the poorest countries, the small island states, indigenous peoples and the poorer communities in richer countries, and they are the black and brown and indigenous people in our world, so it's also a racial injustice.

Secondly, the gender dimension, that women have different social roles, different power, often different rights, like land rights, they have to go further in drought for water or firewood and put food on the table.

The third injustice is the intergenerational injustice, which thankfully, young climate scientists have been calling us out on and made much more visible now.

Fourthly, and it's a subtle one, there's the injustice of the different pathways to development. Industrialized countries, Europe, United States, Japan, Korea, etc., – we built our economies on fossil fuel. So our task now is to wean ourselves off as quickly as possible, and with just transition, meaning that we have to care about the workers who helped us to build these economies – workers in coal, oil, gas, and peat in Ireland, and their communities. They have to be part of the solution. And that needs funding for climate justice.

And the fifth injustice is the injustice to nature herself. The loss of biodiversity, the extinction of species, that report in May of 2019 that said we could face the extinction of a million species. It doesn't make sense that humans are destroying the habitat that we benefit from. So we can't have human flourishing without living sustainably with nature.

But what about developing countries? I was the special envoy of the UN Secretary General before the Paris Agreement. And I saw that developing countries, including the smallest islands, wanted to go green as much as possible. But they said we will need the investment, we will need the technology, we will need the skills, we will need the patent rights even.

And we haven't shown that solidarity. But if they go the dirty route in taking people out of poverty, they will be the first affected – that's the first injustice – but it will use up the carbon budget. So it doesn't make sense for us not to help developing countries to go green. But as yet we are not doing enough of it.

Tavia Gilbert: Robinson recognizes that the voices of the smallest and most vulnerable nations – those that have the most to lose as the earth warms – are wise and powerful.

Mary Robinson: Unless we had that voice in the conferences on climate, we were not going to get the urgency. And that's what happened in Paris. It was the least developed countries and small island states who led the High Ambition Coalition in Paris, focusing on getting into the text of the Paris Agreement, a goal that included staying at 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming above pre industrial standards.

We got that goal. The goal in Paris was we have to stay well below two degrees of warming. And the scientists of the world had given up on 1.5 degrees, and were asked by the Paris Climate Agreement, please study and report to us, is there a difference between two degrees of warming and 1.5 degrees of warming, and if so, do we have to stay at 1.5 degrees, and if so, what should we do?

And they were the questions that were answered in that incredibly important report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC in October 2018. They said, there is a very big difference between two degrees and 1.5 degrees of warming. In that band of time, bad things will probably happen, the Arctic ice will probably disappear, the coral reefs will probably disappear and the permafrost, of which there was a lot around the Arctic, will melt and throw up, not just carbon, but also methane. Therefore, they said the whole world needs to stay at 1.5 degrees.

And it is doable if you have the political will. And it requires us to reduce our emissions by 45% by 2030. And that's where we are now. We would not have had that framing if it hadn't been for the urgency of the most affected and least responsible, in Paris.

Tavia Gilbert: It's not just developing countries that are bearing a disproportionate burden from the effects of climate change, and crying out for their voices to be heard. Robinson says that women worldwide disproportionately endure climate change's unequal impact.

Mary Robinson: The impacts of climate change are more severe on women and girls, again, because of their different social roles. They're more severe if girls have to stay out of education because the school has been destroyed, they're pushed into early child marriage. They're more severe because women still have to put food on the table, as I said.

Women are not just victims, they're also agents for change. And that's something that I'm very keen to show in a very visible way. When I went to my first climate conference, which was Copenhagen in 2009, I was shocked at the lack of a focus on human rights and gender. In the whole approach, it was scientific, technical, and frankly, quite male in the delegates there.

The following year in Cancun, the following conference, we formed a Women's Network on Gender and Climate. That Women's Network was women ministers of the environment, of energy, some of them were foreign affairs, etc. They were in charge of their delegations to these conferences. So they were able to work together for a gender action plan with a whole constituency of women, with support of men.

And they also realized the importance of including in their delegations, as actual delegates, with delegates' badges, grassroots women, indigenous women and young women. And I heard those voices, before Paris, at Paris, and subsequent to the Paris Agreement, making a difference, because they spoke as frontline workers about the reality of what they were living.

And these technical experts, the delegates, listened in some awe at the stories they were hearing, and they really were affected by them. And it increased the urgency again.

Tavia Gilbert: Long-term commitment to a global response to climate change and collective action are making a difference, but Robinson says those efforts must be sustained and embraced wholeheartedly by all global actors. Robinson is disappointed and concerned that the

wealthiest countries have shirked their responsibility to address their global impact, and that the commitments made recently at The Convention on Biological Diversity's 15th Conference of the Parties (or COP) felt short of what is needed to safeguard our planetary future.

Still, she holds out hope that real progress will be made next year at the second part of the Conference of the Parties, to be held in Kunming, China.

Mary Robinson: Countries are working together now, and they're talking about protecting 30% of global land and 30% of the oceans by 2030 as a real step forward in biodiversity. That means reforestation, that means marine areas that are preserved, that means all kinds of things,

And unless we can combine both the nature-based solutions of Kunming, with the commitments, particularly by the richer parts of the world to reduce emissions and provide climate finance and support of the COP 26, unless we see them as one, seamlessly, holistically, we're not going to get there.

Tavia Gilbert: Though Covid has been such a painful teacher, Robinson says that that global crisis has illuminated the need for bold, collective action, and it has offered us important lessons that can guide us as we move to address the threat of a warming climate.

Mary Robinson: One tiny virus that we can't even see has affected us all, and it's affected us unfairly and unequally, because Covid is like a mirror that exacerbates all of the inequalities. And it also reminds us of the intersectionality between those inequalities. Intersectionality is a good feminist term, and it's the link between racial justice, gender justice, poverty justice, the justice for those who are on the margins — migrants, refugees, people with disabilities, etc. All exacerbated, the inequalities have become much greater.

But there are positive lessons. The first lesson is that collective human behavior can actually make a difference. That's what's protecting us at the moment from the virus, while we wait for the better rollout of

vaccines. The willingness to socially distance, the willingness to wash our hands more, to, if necessary, subject ourselves to lockdown and restrictions.

The second lesson is the importance of government. It's a really, really important lesson, because part of the neoliberal economic philosophy was that government was over-bureaucratic, over-wasteful; the private sector, the market, would do it more efficiently. And you know, I'm not against the market, but we know that's not true. We need the combination of a government that has good policies, and a market that works well, fairly and in a balanced way, and serves not just shareholders, but also stakeholders.

The third lesson is that science matters. And that's the link between the health experts and the climate scientists, we have to listen to the climate scientists equally in the future coming out of this crisis.

And the fourth is a subtle one, but I think that, because we're all out of our comfort zone, we're showing more empathy, more compassion. I see it here in Ireland, I see it in Europe, I see it around the world, I see it in African countries, I see it in the United States, where people have suffered terribly, disproportionately because of bad government. And you see people helping their neighbors, reaching out, providing food at food banks, etc.

There isn't enough empathy globally yet, for example, in relation to vaccines, we're seeing a vaccine nationalism. I have, as chair of The Elders, have written an op-ed, and I've written to President Biden to encourage him as he is now done, to step up and say, we have to have a waiver of intellectual property rights when people are dying in such numbers. And he's absolutely right. And I hope the UK and the European Union will also support lifting the waiver in the WTO.

Tavia Gilbert:

Even as Robinson worries for the future, and even as she recognizes the gravity of the impact of climate change, particularly for women and girls, she is also inspired by and finds hope in their creative, grassroots responses to the impact of climate change in their own neighborhoods.

In her 2018 book, *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience, and the Fight for a Sustainable Future*, Robinson tells the stories of on-the-ground leaders

responding to the effects of climate change – especially the mothers and grandmothers who have experienced the effects of global warming firsthand.

Mary Robinson: One of the stories in the book is about Constance Okollet, a farmer from East Uganda. She is a mother of eight children. She's a grandmother now like me, she hadn't particularly known anything about climate change. But when everything was unpredictable, she said to me, "This is outside our experience."

And what happened to her in 2007 was her whole village was destroyed by heavy floods. When they came back to the village, the only house standing – without a roof, but still with the walls, was hers. She ended up with 26 people sleeping there overnight. And then her story of microcredit, building back, organization of women's group, is the story of resilience, and that's how it happens.

Post-Hurricane Katrina, Sharon Henshaw had been living with her salon in East Biloxi. She loved having women come to her salon for their hair and their nails. It was absolutely destroyed by Katrina, there was no help. She was in a FEMA trailer. That's all the help she got, the federal agency. And she suffered the indignity of dire poverty.

She met with Constance at Copenhagen, Constance called her Mississippi Girl, and they compared notes. And you know, when you're in dire poverty, it doesn't matter where you come from. It's just abject and humiliating and terrible. And that's what climate can do to people. And both these women fought back. Sharon describes herself as an accidental activist. She just began to move around, with other activists, and get you know, get mini-credit, get grants, get support, and then become resilient. And these are the people that I really admire, they're my heroes.

Tavia Gilbert: In the face of enormous loss, challenge, discouragement, and uncertainty, these two women, and others, stand out as examples to Robinson of the importance of resilience.

Mary Robinson: I think resilience is extraordinarily important. And I think it's captured in the word hope. I remember being on a panel with Archbishop Tutu in New York, it was a social good conference for

the UN Foundation, and our audience was young people on their iPhones and their iPads, creating a social media buzz. But we will be moderated by an American journalist. And when Archbishop Tutu is in front of an audience, he expresses his love, he waves his arms, he just shows the feelings.

And she turned to him, she said, Archbishop Tutu, “Why are you such an optimist?” And he looked at her and he shook his head, and he said, “Oh, no, I’m not an optimist. I’m a prisoner of hope.” And I remember being very affected by that. And the more I’ve thought about this, the more I’ve thought, a prisoner of hope – the glass may not be half full, but there’s something there in the glass, and you work with it. And if you have that sense of hope, then you build on what you have. And that means you build resilience in your community, against all the odds, which I’m seeing people doing.

And we can talk about, particularly climate change, or the impacts of the climate crisis in a way that fills people with doom. And what happens when you do that, is that people just say, well, look, I can’t do anything about this, I just keep the head down and do what I can in the short term, that’s too big for me.

And that’s exactly what we don’t want. We want everyone to take climate change personally in their lives, to get angry about those who aren’t doing as much as they should be doing, and to imagine this world that we need to be hurrying towards. It has to be very personal, and very much building our own resilience, if you like.

Tavia Gilbert:

Mary Robinson herself is an example of resilience, as she approaches her eighth decade of leadership, stewardship, and social impact. Her willingness to continue to learn, to hear the wisdom of those indigenous leaders others might dismiss, to speak with honesty and integrity, and to listen, first and most, I trust offers not just an example to each of us who share her concern and love for our extraordinary planet, but hope for its future.

We’re going to take a short break for the holidays, but we’ll be back on the fourth Tuesday in January for conversation with another

powerful leader: Hafsat Abiola, President of the Women in Africa Initiative. Here's a preview:

Hafsat Abiola: So in terms of the minimum conditions we need to flourish, I think democracy is one. And I'm very fortunate that my family taught me the importance of sacrificing for creating that kind of world. You know, because my father, and my mother, actually both of them, fought to have democracy in my country and actually died in the course of trying to ensure that Nigerians will have the right to vote.

Tavia Gilbert: We'll be back for the full conversation in 2022. In the meantime, we wish you the happiest holiday season, and a wonderful New Year! If you appreciate the Stories of Impact podcast, please follow the podcast, and rate and review us. We are on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and you can find us at [storiesofimpact.org](https://www.storiesofimpact.org).

This has been the Stories of Impact Podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. Written and produced by Talkbox Productions and Tavia Gilbert, with associate producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive producer Michele Cobb.

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