

Rotary



A GLOBAL AGENDA

Q&A WITH HELEN CLARK



Audiences at the 2018 RI Convention were inspired and challenged when Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand (1999-2008), Administrator of the United Nations Development Program (2009-17) and one of the architects of the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), joined then RI president Ian Riseley to discuss gender equality and the environment, how both are intrinsically linked to the SDGs' 15 other goals and Rotary's role in helping carry out this global agenda.

Ian Riseley: You've been described as a smasher of glass ceilings. When you came into politics women were very much the exception. What was that like?

Helen Clark: There were 92 MPs and eight were women – under 10 per cent – though this was actually twice the amount of the election before. People started saying, "Women are taking over!" I don't think very much was expected of us, despite New Zealand being the very first country in the world where women were the first to fight for and win the vote 125 years ago this year.

In fact, during my very first election campaign when I went to address a Rotary club in a regional area, one of the gentlemen present said to me, "You know, with the skills you've got – you'd make a wonderful farmer's wife!"

IR: The good news is, times have changed ever so slightly since then! I believe close to 40 per cent of MPs are women in New Zealand, which is very high in world terms. And, of course, you now have a woman Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, who has just given birth to a child – and who used to be a member of your staff. Do you see your role as a mentor to other women – and what do you think of the world reaction to Jacinda having a baby in office?

HC: Jacinda is a really remarkable young woman. Indeed, she was a junior staffer when I was Prime Minister. She used to help get the facts together for me to answer questions in parliament. She learnt how I operated very early on, but she is very much her own person and has her own style.

Her partner will stay home and take care of the infant when she goes back to work after six weeks of parental leave. When I started, it would have been unthinkable that a Prime Minister would be a woman and that she would have a baby and that she would not be married to her partner. New Zealand really has changed for the better to become a more accepting and tolerant society.

To learn more about the Sustainable Development Goals visit sustainabledevelopment.un.org

IR: Rotary is a bit like the UN in that we have had many women leaders, but not that many towards the top. Some people might say: “Does it matter?” Tell us why you think it’s important we should not just concentrate on getting the best person for the job, but also care if it’s a man or a woman?

HC: I often quote that very quotable phrase of Hilary Clinton, “Gender equality is not just the right thing to do, it’s also the smart thing,” – because with gender equality you represent everybody. I think all organisations, whether they be Rotary or the parliament of a country, need to look like the body of people they represent. This means that in the normal course of events women should be at the top as well as men.

IR: You’re here today as a member of the Club de Madrid, which is an organisation for former Presidents and Prime Ministers of democratic countries. What do you see as the role of former leaders and the Club de Madrid?

HC: Club de Madrid is a wonderful organisation mobilising former heads of state and government to give their experience, knowledge and skills where others would find them useful. It has many good initiatives, especially in promoting the concept of shared societies, shared prosperity and social cohesion. It had input into the design of the Sustainable Development Goals, which very much reflect that approach. Many world leaders retire relatively early (I was 58) and still have many years to do other things. I continue to be active serving society through platforms like Club de Madrid.

IR: We’ve had a number of speakers this week mention the Sustainable Development Goals, of which you were one of the architects. In a nutshell, what are those goals, how did they come about and what do you hope to achieve?



HC: Before the Sustainable Development Goals there were the Millennium Development Goals, which I believe many in Rotary would be familiar with over their 15 years of life. Those goals were great and quite a lot of progress was reported against them on issues of poverty, equality, education, health and so on – though not so much on environment.

When the discussion began on what should replace them, the concept developed out of the Rio+20 Earth Summit in 2012 that we should have truly sustainable goals integrating

people, prosperity and planet on the basis that these things are so interlinked.

For example, we’re not going to resolve poverty and hunger if we continue to degrade our environment to the extent we currently are.

I’m seeing civil society, the big philanthropic societies and the private sector come on board with this global agenda like we’ve never seen before. It’s very encouraging. Rotary is going to be a critical partner too, as you are such an important global movement, very much focused on doing good in our world.



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But it's going to be challenging. We have entrenched poverty and hunger suffered by close to 800 million people in our world today, and on current trends we won't get rid of that by 2030. So, we have to redouble efforts. All the work Rotary does out in the community supporting the most disadvantaged is going to play an important part.

IR: These goals are incredibly ambitious. I looked at some of them: No poverty. Zero hunger. Good health and wellbeing. Quality education. Gender equality. Clean water and sanitation. Affordable and clean energy. And that's just the first seven. I suppose I speak for many when I say are these goals genuinely realistic?

HC: You can say they are aspirational. But, you know, in Australia and New Zealand and Canada we pretty much tick most of those boxes. Yes, we have relative poverty in our societies, but we also have safety nets to prevent people falling into abject and degrading poverty. That has to be the minimum acceptable.

I think a very challenging set of goals for developed countries is on the environment. Because the traditional way of developing our societies has been very much a "grow first, clean up later" one, and we've done a lot of damage. The removal of our forests, what's happened with greenhouse gases and so on.

IR: This conference we've been talking about Rotary's six Areas of Focus and how they interact. The connection between literacy

and sanitation for example. Now you've talked a lot about equality for women being an area that touches on everything else: it is its own goal, but also a prerequisite for the other 16.

HC: Where women have access to education, their whole family benefits as a result – when that effect is multiplied, a whole society improves.

Research shows that for each additional year of education a woman gets, her children's chances of living to five years and beyond are increased. If a woman can complete her education, and her age of marriage and first baby is delayed, that's good for her health and her self-determination as well as for her children. There are so many things about gender equality – equal access to education and to health services and to be able to earn in the economy – that are positive for women and for everybody else.

IR: What do you think the best and most effective things Rotarians can do both locally and globally to

bring about a resilient, sustainable and equitable world?

HC: I see all these issues as very interlinked. Let's look at the issue of food security, which is so challenged by what is happening to our climate.

I've travelled a lot to dry land countries in Africa. So often you hear the farmers say, "I don't know when to plant my crops anymore, because the rains are unpredictable". If you're a subsistence farmer and you've planted your seeds and the rains don't come – and you've used up your credit – you're in a lot of trouble. You can't grow your own food and you can't afford to buy it.

The numbers of hungry people went up in 2016, the first year this century that that's been the case. That's really the canary in the mineshaft. To Rotary I would say, internationally, support people who are so susceptible to these kinds of events via supporting crop insurance and building basic water infrastructure, for example.

At the other end of the scale are sea levels rising and flooding. Again, helping communities become more resilient to these kinds of events is extremely important. In developed countries, there is so much more to do in terms of the environment, which will help us better cope with adverse events as well.

IR: Thank you. That's a challenge for all of us. •



Then RI president Ian Riseley presented former Prime Minister of New Zealand Helen Clark with a Rotary International Award of Honour during their discussion.