

# Toward a Politics of Responsibility: The Case of Climate Change

BY KATHRYN SIKKINK



*This excerpt has been edited for clarity.*

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On November 21, 2019 the Sir Warren and Anita Manshel Lecture in American Foreign Policy was delivered by Kathryn Sikkink at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. Sikkink is the Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at Harvard Kennedy School.  
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Today I'm going to be speaking about material from my forthcoming book, *The Hidden Face of Rights: Toward a Politics of Responsibility*. And I'm very happy because literally the first copy of the book arrived in my office yesterday. So you are the first people ever to see the new book, and this book is based on what we call the Castle Lectures that I gave at Yale almost two years ago.

And the topic of the book is a broader look at how to combine rights and responsibilities. And climate change is just one of about five topics I talked about in that book, but it's a particularly useful case to make the main point of the book, and that is that it's not enough in these days to talk about rights. We have a big gap in implementation with rights. And in order to implement rights more fully, we have to think simultaneously about rights and responsibilities.

And that when we think of responsibilities, it's not enough to think just about state responsibilities. Of course, and of course with climate change, we want to think about state responsibilities for mitigating climate change, we want to think about corporate responsibilities. But we also want to think about responses of other nonstate actors. And in that I include—I include not just corporations for nonstate actors, but also NGOs, also universities, also individuals.

And now some of you who may be familiar with my previous work or listening to Melani's description of my previous work, you may say, so why is Kathryn Sikkink, who's an IR scholar of human rights, transitional justice, and norm theory all of a sudden talking about climate change? And it is true that I'm new to this issue. But I'm

talking about it for a couple of reasons. One reason is that climate activists themselves are beginning to use human rights as a frame to think about climate.

And so for example, here are the young plaintiffs in a lawsuit in *Juliana v. US* which is asking the US government to recognize the rights of future generations and step up and do more on climate change. There is a similar case in Colombia that the young plaintiffs have won their case in the Colombian Constitutional Court, and the Constitutional Court is requiring the Colombian government to meet with the young plaintiffs and other communities to form an intergenerational climate pact, and especially around deforestation. Colombia, to meet its Paris Agreement goals, has promised [to stop] deforestation. And so it focuses on how Colombia can do a better job on that.

Greta Thunberg is working with fifteen other children to bring a case to the United Nations. Here she's bringing the case to the UN committee that oversees the Convention on the Rights of the Child—the Human Rights of the Child, and she's saying that states have violated the human rights of children and the future generations of children by failing to address climate change.

But even more kind of far-fetched arguments—rights arguments—are being made in this area. So there's arguments of the rights of trees. This comes from Christopher Stone's book, but also a very well-cited law review article on the rights of trees. People are making arguments about getting rights for rivers, and here, Colorado River was trying to join other rivers of the world, including the Ganges River, which are already recognized as bearers of rights.

And perhaps the biggest example is the Earth herself being seen as having rights. So Pachamama is the Earth goddess in some Andean indigenous cultures, and in both Ecuador and Bolivia, the constitutions talk about rights of Pachamama. So it's not so much that I'm moving to climate change, it's that the climate change people have come to my realm, the realm of human rights.

I am not at all opposed to these rights claims; I'm not opposed to the notion that rivers, trees, or Pachamama herself should have rights. And I'm, in fact, particularly enthusiastic about the idea of thinking about rights of future generations. But it illustrates my broader point in this book, and that is: rights only get us so far. And if we do not combine our concern with rights with a robust understanding of responsibilities—of states and nonstate actors—we will not be able to implement these rights.

Now the other reason I'm kind of following through on thinking about climate change is that—this is in my rights and responsibilities framework—IR scholars who've dedicated themselves much more to climate change, in this

case, Robert Keohane, who spoke here two years ago, are starting to write in a way that really leaves a door open for people who do my kind of work.

So here's Keohane and Oppenheimer, and they're saying climate change is not going to be solved at the level of international negotiations, right? It will depend much on domestic and transnational politics. And—I really love this part—the Paris Agreement accomplishes little, but it opens what was a locked door. That door is now a little bit ajar, pushing hard to carry us through to a better outcome. But nothing will be accomplished at the international coalition level alone.

So the question before us is: the door is open by Paris—how do we push through that door? And I'm going to argue that some of the work that I've done in my whole lifetime on transnational social movements, on norm change, on norm entrepreneurs, on how do you move from having norm entrepreneurs to having social movements that can bring about dramatic change in the world is now relevant to this climate change area.

So in some of the earlier books that Melani mentioned, *Activists beyond Borders* or *The Justice Cascade*, I studied historical and current norms campaigns. I went all the way back—I have a chapter that looks at the antislavery movement, looks at women's suffrage. One of my favorite cases was the issue of ending foot-binding in China, for example. And then I looked at the ways in which human rights entered into first international relations, international law, and then into American foreign policy.

Of course now we think human rights is part of foreign policy, but Henry Kissinger wrote in 1976 that human rights had no place in foreign policy. So things change, and they change because of the kinds of people that I call norm entrepreneurs. In other words, they change from the bottom-up. Usually the changes do not happen from the top-down. Governments don't offer individuals their rights on a platter. People demand their rights, they organize campaigns, and they bring about change.

And so for example, in the case of antislavery activists—originally tiny groups of Quakers—who first put forward this idea, which was a crazy idea at the time, that

slavery was social sin and must be ended. Eventually they were able to elect members to the UK Parliament and into the US Congress.

And those—I don't know if anyone's seen the book or the movie *Amazing Grace*, but it tells the story of Wilbur Wilberforce who was one of the abolitionists elected to the Parliament—the UK Parliament. They called them the Saints. There weren't very many of them, but they were the swing votes in the UK Parliament. And they were the ones who insisted on abolition as part of the price of their membership in the coalition, and that's what led the British to push for abolition of slavery.

And so these social movements do not have to become—they do not become majoritarian movements, but they learn how to wield some power to bring about change. So the thing that happens with these norm entrepreneurs is they take ideas that at the time—when you go back and study the history, at the time were unimaginable, and they turn them into things that are eventually taken for granted. And sometimes that takes centuries. And sometimes it moves a lot faster than that.

So for example, in my book *The Justice Cascade*, I studied this new trend of how you move from it being unimaginable to hold state officials criminally accountable for mass atrocity. Up until—except for Nuremberg and Tokyo trials—about 1973, it was unimaginable that state officials would be held accountable for human rights violations committed during their terms. And yet now today we have an International Criminal Court (ICC) capable and in the process of prosecuting official state officials for mass atrocity. I'm actually very pleased to have in the room my friend and colleague, the founding prosecutor of the ICC, Luis Moreno Ocampo.

So my point here is we need norm entrepreneurs, and guess what? We've got them. The young people are stepping forward to be the norm entrepreneurs. This is a photo I took at the climate march—the climate strike in Boston. They're skipping their lessons to teach us one.

Well the lesson—so we've got the norm entrepreneurs, but now we have to figure out how are we going to take responsibility to begin to use to support, sustain, disagree, but generally be

part of this coalition that these norm entrepreneurs are trying to form. What do we really mean by responsibility? It's one of those ordinary words we use a lot.

But when I started to use it in casual conversation, I started to get a lot of pushback. People don't like the word "responsibility," and they really don't like the word

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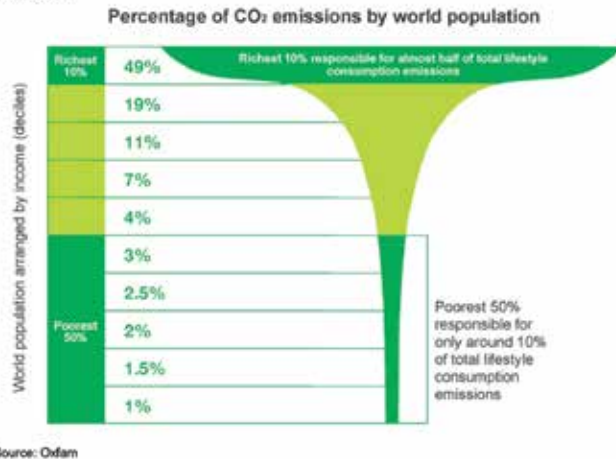
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Left to right: Kathryn Sikkink, Acting Center Director Melani Cammett, and David Manshel before the lecture.

# Forward Looking Responsibility for Climate Change: Power and Privilege

Figure 1: Global income deciles and associated lifestyle consumption emissions



Infographic: Slide from lecture showing Oxfam data on the percentage of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by world population arranged by income. Photos: Audience members, including Faculty Associate Christina Davis (top) and Executive Officer of The Harvard Academy Bruce Jackan (bottom), participate in an engaging Q&A at the end of the lecture.

“duty,” which is how we used to talk about it, and obligations. And so I started to feel like there was something interesting, because when I brought up responsibility and especially nonstate responsibility, I started to get a lot of pushback. And one reason why climate change is a good case is that people are willing to stay with me longer when I start talking about responsibility.

In thinking about responsibility, I drew very much on political theorists, like Iris Marion Young. This is her beautiful posthumous book called *Responsibility for Justice*. And Young makes an argument that I think helps us understand why people don’t like responsibility. Because mainly when we say responsibility, we mean what Young calls the “liability model.” We mean, who’s to blame? Who can we sue, who can we punish? And that’s what she calls backward-looking responsibility. And the main model, where we have a responsibility in the world, is actually a backward-looking blame model.

And this is partly driven by lawyers. That’s their job, blaming people—find out who to sue and who to punish. But it means that sometimes we are too backward-looking. Now, I’m in favor of punishment for some rights issues, OK? I believe that state leaders deserve to be held criminally responsible for mass atrocity. But for most human rights issues and also for climate change, punishment doesn’t get you very far. You need to have forward-looking responsibility. Instead of saying who’s to blame, you need to say also, what can we do together in order to bring about change as we move forward?

And that’s how Young helped me. She has what she calls a social connection model of responsibility. So instead of being backward-looking, it’s forward-looking, and it says all the actors who are socially connected to a structural injustice and able to act must take action. And I think that we’ve reached the point with climate change where that’s exactly correct. All the actors socially connected to the

structural injustice of climate change and able to act need to step forward, take responsibility, and act together.

I first have to say, to the lawyers present, that I’m not talking about legal responsibility here. This forward-looking specifically is not legal responsibility. I’m talking about ethical and political responsibility. And so if it’s ethical and political, then the question that Young asks is, how do we reason about it?

And Young gives us what she calls four parameters to reason about one’s own actions and those of others. And those four parameters are power, privilege, collective ability, and interest. And I’m going to focus today on power and privilege. And the reason I’m doing that is because we know from the data on emissions, and especially on these so-called lifestyle consumption emissions, that about 10 percent of the world’s wealthiest people produce 49, almost 50 percent of global lifestyle emissions. And that the poorest 50 percent are only responsible for 10 percent of total lifestyle emissions. So it means it’s really important to think about power and privilege.

But as soon as I say 10 percent, most of us in the room—and this would be myself included, initially—think oh yeah, those wealthy 10 percent out there, those people who travel by plane every day to London or whatever. And then I started gathering the data—who are the 10 percent wealthiest people in the world? And it turns out—I have two different sources, I’m sure there’s debate—something between \$68,000 and \$100,000 in assets puts you in the 10 percent wealthiest people in the world.

So I can say, with regard to my colleagues at the Kennedy School, for example, that my faculty colleagues and I are in the 10 percent wealthiest people in the world. I’m not going to make any generalizations about the audience, but my colleagues and I are there. And what that means is we can’t keep saying, oh the responsibility, it’s those wealthy 10 percent out there. We have to say, no, if we’re concerned about people with power and privilege taking action, that needs to include us, me and my colleagues at the Kennedy School.

This idea of responsibility is starting to catch on. This is a survey that was done in August this year, 2019. It’s not a huge survey, it’s only a little over 1,000 people, so it’s only suggestive. But it suggests that US citizens are beginning to think about responsibility in more diverse ways.

So that while of course they are most concerned—and correctly so—about responsibility of corporations, the US federal government, and developed or industrialized countries outside of the US, they recognize that individual people, as well as your local government officials, also have a great deal or some responsibility. So 79 percent of people in this survey think that individuals have a great deal of—or some—responsibility for climate change.