

Karen O'Brien, awardee in the Climate Change category (13th edition)

It is a great honor and privilege for me to be a co-recipient of the BBVA Foundation's Frontiers of Knowledge award for climate change, together with Professors Neil Adger and Ian Burton. It was a wonderful surprise to receive the phone call informing me of the award. The call came on a dark winter afternoon during the Covid-lockdown, in the middle of a zoom meeting. I was at a loss for words – in this case truly "muted" by the honor. It was a moment that I will always remember.

I consider the prestigious Frontiers of Knowledge award to be a valuable recognition of the research that we have been doing in collaboration and in community with so many other scholars who are seeking to understand the social and human dimensions of climate change. How do climate change impacts affect society? Why are some people or groups more vulnerable than others, and how can we adapt to risks that we ourselves are creating? Most of all, how do we transform society in an equitable and sustainable manner? My research has been motivated by a concern over what climate change means for equity and human security and it has focused on why climate change is so much more than an environmental problem. It is, in fact, a social problem and a human problem, and as a result we need broader and deeper approaches to both understand and address it.

Almost 25 years ago, my close collaborator Professor Robin Leichenko and I started to look at how climate change and globalization processes intersect and interact to create winners and losers. We also looked at how they create mutual feedbacks, for example through the melting of Arctic ice that opens up new trade and shipping routes and facilitates access to more oil and minerals. We referred to these interactions as "double exposure." We have seen cases of double exposure play out systematically all over the world. The social and human outcomes of climate change are neither random nor unexpected, and during the Covid pandemic it has become clear that health crises, economic crises, and climate crises must be looked at together. For together they are shaping the context for human development and sustainability.

Responses to climate change must focus not only on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but also on reducing the underlying drivers of social vulnerability, and protecting biodiversity and ecosystems that are vital to a thriving planet. As a society, we will need to adapt to dramatic



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changes in the coming decade. To do this, we first need to adapt to the very idea that we are capable of transforming complex, large-scale systems such as the climate. And we must acknowledge and explore how we can transform energy systems, food systems, mobility systems, education systems, and social systems in an equitable, ethical, and sustainable manner.

The Frontiers of Knowledge award attests to the importance of research and its important role in society. As scientists, many of us recognize that research-as-usual is no longer enough within the context of climate change, and I believe that we are all committed to making our research matter. Collectively, we have an opportunity to co-create a world that works for everyone, and I am grateful that this year's BBVA Foundation's Frontiers of Knowledge award for climate change recognizes the importance of social science perspectives on climate change. I am truly honored to receive the award, together with my distinguished colleagues. Thank you so much.