

UN climate chief on her plans to save the world

Christiana Figueres sits down with *Nature* as the Paris talks enter their final days.

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PARIS



Pause (k)

Christiana Figueres has a big job. As the executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, she is in Paris this week to guide 195 governments as they try [to broker a new global agreement](#) to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Figueres, whose father helped to install democracy in Costa Rica and served three terms as the country's president, tells *Nature* how she ended up working in environmental policy — and what she hopes to get out of the ongoing climate talks in Paris. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

What is your academic background?

I'm not a trained environmentalist. I'm not trained in any of the natural sciences. I'm trained in social sciences — an anthropologist.

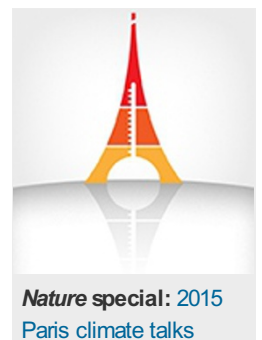
How did you get into environmentalism?

Because of a little frog. The golden toad was endemic to one of our most beautiful cloud forests in Costa Rica, Monte Verde. It was a little toad I had seen as a young girl, and by the time I had two young girls who were that age, this toad had disappeared. That had a real impact. When you are a young mother, you feel this deep responsibility for the quality of life that you are providing for your children.

That was a real awakening for me. The scientists in Monte Verde told me they weren't quite sure, but there was something about the temperature that was causing a disease on their skin — they thought that that's why these toads had disappeared. I started reading myself into the topic, and before I knew it, I was devoting my life to climate change.

What about your father?

My father definitely had a huge impact on all of our lives. He was a revolutionary to reinstate democracy, but perhaps more importantly,



he was always guided by the very, very deeply held principle that our duty in life was to do everything that we can to protect the most vulnerable, and to ensure that, in our service, we were being guided by expanding the opportunities for those who don't have the opportunities that we have. That was something that was engrained into us by both parents, ever since we were very, very young.

That same motivation is guiding you today, right?

It's the same process. I think about him constantly. That was his battle. He chose Costa Rica and Latin America as his battleground, and I happened to choose a different battleground at the global level, but it's the same thing. It is very much the same battle of realizing that what we do is not necessarily helping to improve the quality of life of those who are [at the bottom of the pyramid](#). We have a huge moral responsibility to do everything that we can to improve that situation.

What was your strategy when you took this job in 2010?

I remember walking into the [UN climate] secretariat and having this astonishing feeling that up until then, I had been a fish that was trying to walk on the ground. And all of a sudden this fish was released into the water. I went, 'Wow, this is exactly where I have to be right now'. [I was] very happy to pick up the secretariat and the process from in the garbage can, where it was. I don't know how many people would have wanted to do that, but it [truly was in the garbage can](#) after Copenhagen. I thought, you know honestly, this is a huge opportunity — a huge opportunity.

What is your mandate?

I was very, very committed to expanding the [role of the secretariat](#) beyond governments. If you are going to have an economic transformation, an energy transformation — if you are going to have a social transformation, it can't just be the central governments. A government-agreement process, or an intergovernmental process, is certainly the centre, but it took quite a few years for us as a group to understand that the circumference is actually the real world.

We all went to [Copenhagen](#) clobbering governments over the head. Completely unhelpful. I was very adamant about changing the message here and saying yes, everybody needs to participate; this is a shared responsibility, but it is in support of what governments are doing.

How are you feeling?

Of course I get tense. My daughters keep me fed, and they make sure that I'm sleeping. I wouldn't say it's the most restful sleep, but that's not what we are here for. We are here to get a task done.

What comes next?

The mobilization around this has been beyond anything that I could have imagined, and it needs to continue. What is going to happen here in Paris is certainly that the direction will be very clear, but [the pace is going to be insufficient](#). We are just not where we need to be with technology, with capital. So I think my first responsibility is going to be to thank everybody and to apply [yet again another word of encouragement](#), because we need to take this to the next level.

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