

Climate Action Championed by Young People

Najib Saab. Secretary General of the Arab Forum for Environment and Development

The Youth for Climate movement, launched in 2018 by the Swedish student and activist Greta Thunberg, has had a very positive response from young students in many countries, who have organised a series of strikes, marches and protests to urge leaders – whose responses have sometimes been quite irate – to stop global warming and climate change with effective long-term policies. However, in Arab countries, which are particularly sensitive to climate change, the youths' response has not been as enthusiastic. Although there have been good intentions, these have not resulted in visible actions, and students have barely participated in the world protests. Transforming awareness into real and significant actions on climate change is, therefore, one of the most important current challenges facing civil society in Arab countries.

When the 16-year-old Swedish student Greta Thunberg went on a solo strike in summer 2018 to demand more serious action to tackle climate change, she began a daily vigil in front of the parliament building in Stockholm. She did not expect her initiative to kick off a worldwide movement, Youth for Climate Action. Yet, in the following months, protests spread to more than one hundred countries, and millions of school and university students took part in strikes for the environment, stretching from Germany, Belgium and Britain to Australia, Japan and the United States.

In December 2018, Greta addressed world leaders at the climate summit in Poland, calling on them to stop acting like irresponsible children. Later, in January 2019, she challenged business leaders at the Davos summit, urging them not to ignore fundamental humanitarian principles by destroying the world's natural

wealth, motivated only by greed to generate more profits.

As the surge of strikes spread to 123 countries in March 2019, the initiative had swollen into a global movement that could not be ignored anymore. This was the first time that students have taken to the streets in such large numbers in defence of the environment, whereas past similar movements were prompted by protesting wars and calling for peace, especially during the Vietnam era. What may have added fuel to the protest flames was the scientific report released in October by the International Panel on Climate Change, which set a limit of 11 years to take action to prevent the catastrophic consequences of global temperature rising above 1.5 degrees.

Students consider that government and business leaders are blocking and delaying deliberately by failing to take adequate action

to meet the challenge. In response to some officials demanding that the students return to their classes to “do their homework”, the students requested that the government officials themselves do their own homework by safeguarding the right of future generations to resources and a healthy environment, instead of protecting the private interests of some companies. “I will do my homework when you do yours,” was the response of a student in Belgium, where the environment minister was forced to resign under the pressure of protests and accusations of dereliction of duty. A German student accused the minister of industry, during a public discussion, of serving polluting industries and not the interests of people and future generations.

Young people realise how critical the situation is and fear for their future, for they have much to lose if the catastrophic effects of climate change arrive soon on a large scale if no action is taken fast. They look forward to life in the second half of this century, not limiting their ambitions to the coming 20 or 30 years, which is the highest life expectancy of most politicians. A sign held by a young campaigner in Sydney saying “you are burning our future” expressed that exact fear. The consequences of climate change, which are irreversible if they happen on a wide and non-restricted scale, will entail a heavy price to be paid by future generations, giving them the right to a decisive say now.

There will always be those who are sceptical about the students’ motivations, just as they are sceptical about climate change itself. A Belgian minister claimed that he had intelligence reports confirming that outside forces were behind the protests, before the intelligence services denied that claim, which prompted the government to apologise. The scene of students coming out in coordinated, organised and peaceful strikes around the world was shocking to some. But the older

generation has to get used to a new system of life ruled by social media, which young people may be better at exploiting than intelligence agencies. On the other hand, climate change sceptics have resorted to their last line of defence, in defiance of the scientific consensus confirming that the climate is changing due to increased emissions because of human activity. Now they are promoting what they claim are “positive” impacts of climate change, such as that drought in some areas will be offset by increased rainfall in others, and that the melting of polar ice will open new shipping routes and ensure access to additional natural resources. They also say that milder weather conditions in the polar regions will make it possible for people in warmer areas to move north and create new human settlements on previously frozen lands.

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These wild fantasies, however, bluntly ignore the fact that increased rainfall in some parts of the world, caused by climate change, will be in the form of wild hurricanes and catastrophic flash floods, and cannot produce real benefits. Nor can we ask entire communities, from the Arab region for example, to leave their lands and homes, within a period of 50 to 100 years, to start a new life and culture in the North Pole. It is true that mass migrations of this kind have occurred in history but they happened gradually and over millions of years, while the radical change that scientists are warning of may take place within 50 years, which is the estimated lifespan of the students who are demonstrating today.

Two Speeches on Climate Change

The speech at 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24) in Katowice (Poland), 4th December 2018

For 25 years countless of people have stood in front of the United Nations climate conferences, asking our nation's leaders to stop the emissions. But, clearly, this has not worked since the emissions just continue to rise.

So I will not ask them anything.

Instead, I will ask the media to start treating the crisis as a crisis.

Instead, I will ask the people around the world to realize that our political leaders have failed us.

Because we are facing an existential threat and there is no time to continue down this road of madness.

Rich countries like Sweden need to start reducing emissions by at least 15% every year to reach the 2 degree warming target. You would think the media and everyone of our leaders would be talking about nothing else—but no one ever even mentions it.

Nor does hardly anyone ever talk about that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, with up to 200 species going extinct every single day.

Furthermore, does no one ever speak about the aspect of equity clearly stated everywhere in the Paris agreement, which is absolutely necessary to make it work on a global scale. That means that rich countries like mine need to get down to zero emissions, within 6–12 years with today's emission speed, so that people in poorer countries can heighten their standard of living by building some of the infrastructures that we have already built. Such as hospitals, electricity and clean drinking water.

Because how can we expect countries like India, Colombia or Nigeria to care about the climate crisis if we, who already have everything, don't care even a second about our actual commitments to the Paris agreement?

So when school started in August this year I sat myself down on the ground outside the Swedish parliament. I school striked for the climate.

Some people say that I should be in school instead. Some people say that I should study to become a climate scientist so that I can "solve the climate crisis". But the climate crisis has already been solved. We already have all the facts and solutions.

And why should I be studying for a future that soon may be no more, when no one is doing anything to save that future? And what is the point of learning facts when the most important facts clearly mean nothing to our society?

Today we use 100 million barrels of oil every single day. There are no politics to change that. There are no rules to keep that oil in the ground.

So we can't save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed.

So we have not come here to beg the world leaders to care for our future. They have ignored us in the past and they will ignore us again.

We have come here to let them know that change is coming whether they like it or not. The people will rise to the challenge. And since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago.

The speech at 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24) in Katowice (Poland), 12th December 2018

My name is Greta Thunberg. I am 15 years old. I am from Sweden. I speak on behalf of Climate Justice Now. Many people say that Sweden is just a small country and it doesn't matter what we do. But I've learned you are never too small to make a difference. And if a few children can get headlines all over the world just by not going to school, then imagine what we could all do together if we really wanted to.

But to do that, we have to speak clearly, no matter how uncomfortable that may be. You only speak of green eternal economic growth because you are too scared of being unpopular. You only talk about moving forward with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess, even when the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like is. Even that burden you leave to us children. But I don't care about being popular. I care about climate justice and the living planet. Our civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money. Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few.

The year 2078, I will celebrate my 75th birthday. If I have children maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there still was time to act. You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes.

Until you start focusing on what needs to be done rather than what is politically possible, there is no hope. We can't solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis. We need to keep the fossil fuels in the ground, and we need to focus on equity. And if solutions within the system are so impossible to find, maybe we should change the system itself. We have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You have ignored us in the past and you will ignore us again. We have run out of excuses and we are running out of time. We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people. Thank you.

Greta Thunberg. Activist of Climate Justice Now

Of course, there is a big difference between the motives of fresh young people with fewer current financial and practical worries, whose genuine concern for the future drives them to demonstrate today, and a generation that is pressured by everyday life challenges. Besides these two parties, there are the governments that believe that the problem can be postponed through populist policies that sell people short-term benefits stolen from their own future accounts or corporate leaders who are eager to double their profits by taking advantage of the limited window of opportunity remaining before the rules of the game change.

The most prominent achievement of the Youth for Climate Action movement is making its voice heard and opening a serious discussion on real issues. Throughout history, young people have been a catalyst of change. The louder their voices, the harder it is for officials to turn a deaf ear, because today's children and youths will soon be controlling the fate of these officials in ballot boxes.

Arab Countries: Timid Climate Response

Remarkably, the global youth climate movement did not resonate in Arab countries, where a tangible response was lacking. School strikes did not happen, and reactions were limited to general support statements issued by individuals and associations largely representing the older generation. Although they acted with good intentions, those environmental activists behaved as if they just wanted to jump on the bandwagon.

Some of the "old guard" justified the absence of Arab students from the streets on 15 March by claiming that it was better to issue statements while still attending their classes, although the strike was limited to one day only. This attitude, however, defies the very purpose

of a strike, which is to draw attention to the causes championed and enforce dialogue by disrupting static schedules. We have never heard of an Arab student confronting politicians by demanding that they do their homework before telling students to do theirs, as happened in Australia.

There is a big difference between the motives of fresh young people with fewer current financial and practical worries, whose genuine concern for the future drives them to demonstrate today, and a generation that is pressured by everyday life challenges

The lack of response from young people contradicts earlier ambitious forecasts, making it obvious that action in Arab countries does not necessarily follow declared intentions. An article published by the World Economic Forum, as part of its annual meeting in Davos in January 2019, proclaimed in its title that "the Arab world's best weapon against climate change is its young people." The article was referring to an "Arab Youth Climate Movement", declared in Doha, Qatar, in the months leading to the climate summit, COP 18, which convened in Doha in November 2012. Yet, just two months after the enthusiastic article was published, those same young Arabs it referred to were, absurdly, the only ones absent from a world movement advocating climate action.

When the Arab Youth Climate Movement kicked off in Doha, an article described it as "the new group taking the green world by storm." Enthusiasm for such a movement in the Arab region, especially when it originates in a country that leads the world as the highest carbon emitter per capita, is understood. However, good intentions alone cannot mobilise young people for genuine climate action. Paradoxically, the founder of the Qatari

group happens to be an Indian living in Doha, and the movement never attracted locals. A “demonstration” staged by the group in Doha during COP 18 to demand climate action was limited to a few dozen foreigners, and looked like more of a theatrical performance staged for international television networks than an act to influence local and Arab politicians towards taking serious action. Seven years later, with the “Movement” claiming chapters in 15 Arab countries, no actual mobilisation or concrete action could be seen.

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Arab people and governments are more aware of the seriousness of the impacts of climate change, to which their countries are among the most vulnerable. However, in spite of the 22 countries that are members of the

League of Arab States signing the Paris Agreement, there had been no coherent regional approach to address climate change risks. Taking into account the challenges of water shortages and food security in the Arab region, which will be aggravated by climate change, any serious approach should be anchored in the Water-Food-Energy nexus. Arab policy-makers should therefore revisit their development strategies with a new nexus lens. National and regional efforts to address the climate change challenge provide an unprecedented opportunity for a much-needed institutional reform to maintain the nexus thinking in policy development and implementation. Young people have big stakes in enforcing such changes, but to affect action they should be locally organised around a common cause.

The challenge remains as to how to transform awareness into real action and how to attract young people to play a bigger role in a society free from suppression, which safeguards and emboldens free minds. Change cannot coexist with fear.



General Assembly Som Energia 2017 in front of a building covered by solar panels (Susanne Hirschmann).