Greta Thunberg joins youth from 37 countries

450 Youth Leaders Converge for Climate Awareness 
in Lausanne, Switzerland

by Marie-Claire Pret

Young people from many countries in Europe arrived in Lausanne on 5 August 2019 to shake up adults (!) into taking action for climate protection, and specifically, to strategize as to future steps their ‘Fridays for Future’ (FFF) movement should take to keep up the momentum gained over the past year.

The week-long summit, dubbed SMILE for Future(1) will end on 9 August and the goal is to set up a modus operandi for future cross-country strikes and other actions. It takes place at the University of Lausanne (UNIL) – Sorge campus.

These youngsters – some as young as 12, most between 15 and 18 and a few of university age – are among the many students in European countries who have been attracting media attention for their ‘climate strikes’ on Fridays in front of their schools. The trigger for these strikes was Greta Thunberg, the Swedish 16-year-old who first sat down – alone – in front of her school in Stockholm with a sign drawing attention to the climate crisis. Gradually other students joined her in front of the school, and later their example spread to other countries.

Some older guests were present on the Opening Day podium next to Greta during the press conference, notably Swiss Prof. Jacques Dubochet, Nobel Prize in Chemistry (2017), and Prof. Ernst von Weizsacker, physicist and biologist, and Honorary President of the Cub of Rome which was one of the first
organizations to denounce unlimited economic growth as unsustainable as far back as ...1972 (2). These scientists strongly and enthusiastically support Greta in her awareness-raising activism.

Although both adults provided scientific data to the media when they were able to access the microphone, all media eyes were riveted on young Greta’s face and most questions from the press were directed exclusively at her. Greta seemed weary under the camera scrutiny, sometimes darting her eyes to the side. She offered no opening statement, even effacing herself. “I don’t really have much to say... I’ve spoken so much before”, deferring to the two scientists next to her.

Later, during the Question/Answer session, she elaborated: “I am not a leader to follow, I am a participant (...) We children shouldn’t have to do this... we would like for adults to join us, to share the burden... We’d like to return to school (alluding to the Friday strikes). But then I remember I am doing this for a good cause; we know our future is in danger.”

Once, she took the microphone and stated with some vehemence: “(Since) last year, a lot of things have happened. And then of course, the global emissions haven’t come down, so we’re still back on square one. We will need to do so much more .. we are still only scratching the surface. I and everyone in the movement will focus on spreading public awareness on what’s going on. Because I believe once people fully realize the situation they will change, they will wake up. We are going to (continue to) present the facts. And I hope the IPCC (3) report to be published this Thursday in Geneva will be widely disseminated by the media so that people will know what the situation is.”
Opening Day, left to right: Young event organiser Loukina T. from Lausanne, Greta Thunberg from Sweden, Professor Jacques Dubochet (Nobel Prize in Chemistry), Canton de Vaud, and Professor von Wezsacker (Club of Rome - 1972).

A European citizens’ initiative is launched:

‘Actions on Climate Emergency’

by MCP

During the press conference the summit announced that it was launching ‘Actions on Climate Emergency’, a citizens’ initiative which asks the European Union (EU) to set more ambitious goals than those set at present.
The initiative has four objectives:

First, the EU must decrease its carbon emissions by 80% by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality in 2035. Currently, the EU aims to reduce its emissions by 40% by 2030.

Second, a carbon tax must be applied at the border between countries, to tax imports. This would make it possible to set Europe’s economic transition at the same level as countries which don’t respect the 1.5-degree limit on global warming.

Third, the EU must only sign commercial treaties with countries which have agreed to pursue the 1.5-degree limit.

Fourth, the EU must produce educational materials (free of charge) for schools in all countries of the union to explain the climate emergency, and to envisage solutions.

The initiative aims to collect at least a million signatures in one year.

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**Greta: “a danger to society”-- or an icon for change?**

_by MCP_

In response to a journalist’s question re. the ‘danger’ she purportedly represents to society, as has been advanced by some of her detractors, Greta replied: “Yes, I’m a very dangerous person (irony in her voice). People say that all the time about our movement. We have an impact and they think they must silence us and create confusion. I think it’s a good sign, it proves we count. They feel threatened.”

Outside of the conference, at a rare interview she gave to the RTS(4) later that day, Greta said: “I say to people, ‘There is a fire! And instead of looking at the fire, they look at me! They want to avoid seeing the situation’.”
A thoughtful Greta during “temperature checks”, before voting on proposals during the week in Lausanne.
Greta seems to attract either admiring support or viscerally opposed reactions. Her strongest critics use virulent language to describe her and have been known to attack her physique and her Asperger syndrome condition.

For example, French author Michel Onfray sees in her "the age, the sex and the body of a cyborg of the third millennium". “Her envelope is neutral. She is unfortunately that which Man is moving towards.”(5)

In connection with her guest appearance at the French ‘Assemblée Générale’ in July 2019 she was qualified as “an apocalyptic guru” and “a Nobel Prize of Fear” by elected officials Guillaume Larrivé and Julien Aubert respectively(6), and recently, Australian columnist Andrew Bolt described Thunberg as “deeply disturbed”, “freakishly influential” and “strange”(7).

Greta has also been accused of being manipulated by capitalist ‘green-washers’ and even of having been totally ‘fabricated’ by her parents or by communications specialists. She has explained on a number of occasions that she stands on her own, that she is not being manipulated. “(These people) are trying to make excuses to focus (away) from the climate crisis. Of course, we can understand that, as they are not fully aware of the crisis. But still it’s sad ... to see people spreading conspiracy theories, lies, hate.”(8) She has stated at times she is helped – something she says is very different from being manipulated -- by people or foundations who support the cause.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, she is referred to as “the climate star” and “ecology’s icon” and has motivated young people across Europe to stand up for climate protection. The visibility given to her by the media is itself testimony to her impact, and many of her public appearances have been considered highly successful. The Dalai-Lama Tenzin Gyatro has given her his “unconditional support”, noting that “she has awakened people regarding scientific consensus on climate change and the urgency of taking action.” She has even been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.
In a sense, the impact she has on many people is reminiscent of the impact the child had in the tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” Against all odds, when adults, and indeed, everyone in the kingdom carried on with the farce of admiring the fine clothes of their absolutely naked Emperor, finally one child spoke truth to power. He had the courage to speak out: “But look! The Emperor has no clothes!” Only then did others begin taking up the cry.(9)
Soai O’C. (16) holds up a sign referring to the famous tale by Hans Christian Andersen. If you're not sure what the connection is between Greta and the protagonist of this tale, see the opening article to this Summit series..... and perhaps (re) read the tale. Speaking truth to power.
In a Ted Talk she gave in 2018, Greta spoke of her disillusionment with society’s attitude to climate change and how that had affected her health in the recent past. “Why wasn’t anyone doing anything (about it)? It was unreal. I became ill. I stopped talking and eating, lost 10 kilos in two months. I was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and selective mutism (only speaking when one thinks there is something to say).” She explained that those who have her condition “are not very good at lying and don’t enjoy participating in the social game the rest of you are so fond of.”(10)

On Monday in the RTS interview we got a glimpse of how Greta has turned her climate disillusionment and her Asperger syndrome around: “At the beginning it wasn’t a strength, but then, under the right circumstances, I was able to reverse the situation, so that instead of a weakness, it became a strength. It makes me different from others, I think differently, outside the box, and this is necessary when we must see things from outside our current system .. Without that, I wouldn’t have had the time or the energy to spend thousands of hours reading all these facts.”(11)

The youth movement in favour of climate protection is sometimes presented as a new form of puritanism, but Greta concludes: “Even if the situation is difficult, we are teenagers like the others, except that we are activists for this cause... and it must take place with Joy!”(12)

Perhaps the final word can be left to French editorialist Pascal Riché, who stated at the time Greta was expected to appear at the French ‘Assemblée Générale’ that while Greta elicits adulation on the one hand, and calls for a boycott on the other, “The young Swedish girl merits neither excessive honour nor indignity.” He concluded that “she is but a representative of the next generation, who is right to alert us” and as such, considers her “a necessary icon.”(13)
‘The Process is as important as the Outcome’(14)
by MCP

After the press conference(15), the young participants worked in different auditoriums and rooms to organize the week’s agenda and, to identify the most important topics to be discussed and voted on regarding Values, Demands, and Strategy for future actions.

Participants in one auditorium were encouraged to work in small groups to write down topics of interest on banners of paper, which were then pasted on standing bulletin boards. Everything was organized by the young people themselves, with some of them in facilitators’ roles to move the process along (for example, gathering the banners of paper and pasting them on the boards, asking for input/reactions from the plenary, etc.). The emphasis was on transparency and inclusivity.

“There is no hierarchy, and everyone’s voice counts equally”, several participants explained spontaneously. A special ‘sign language’ was used to elicit silence in the auditorium when necessary, to show approval (by fluttering one’s hands, without clapping and thereby making noise), etc.(16)

The week-long event is organized by the youth leaders of the Lausanne Climate Strike (24 May 2019), so essentially the facilitators of the process were youth from Lausanne. Most of the facilitators were girls and young women (!).

Plenary presentations of each banner -- by one member of each small group -- began to reveal what some of the ‘hot topics’ would be:

- Economic degrowth!
- Will we ourselves become part of the politico-economic system one day? Jobs...
• Do we change the political system from the inside or the outside ..? How do we avoid becoming part of the problem?

• Food waste .. let’s start here! How we eat during this event .. do we serve ourselves just enough, or too much and then leave food on the tray? Can we ask that the food leftover be given away, not thrown away.

• We can’t eradicate one problem if another one pops up which is ‘even bigger’, for example, unemployment. We must think of both sides...

• Should big cities be the driving force of the movement?

• We need more clarification on the democratic structure of the movement

• Organizing strikes every week or even every month is too much in some countries.. not enough people in some places, danger of burnout, etc.

• How to take care of ourselves – Avoid burnout – Help people with climate anxiety

• Accessibility to climate strikes (political pressures...also, difficulties for people with handicaps)

• The prohibition against minors striking (in some countries)

(etc., etc.)

At one-point things were getting quite mental and people were beginning to feel glued to their chairs... The facilitators called for a Break. Stand up! Wave your hands! Jump! Smile!

Then it was back to work, with a twist: participants were asked to try to group together some of the banners on the boards, if the topics potentially overlapped with others ... some interesting intersectionality was discovered in certain cases. The banners were then moved and pasted next to the ‘overlapping’ ones, becoming a cluster of topics. The huge mass of topics was reduced to a somewhat more manageable size...
África C. (Catalunya, Spain) has six green dots at her disposal and ponders how much weight to give to certain topics for discussion. Example: Personal sacrifices as a climate activist / How to attract attention and people to the cause.

The final phase for the first day: participants were each given six adhesive green “dots” and asked to paste them on the six most important topics in their opinion. A voting of sorts, in order to select which topics -- or clusters of topics -- would be retained for discussion the next day (Tuesday).
“Then if people support a topic or cluster throughout Tuesday’s discussions, it will go into the Strategy group for refinement over the last couple of days of the event and for adoption on Friday as part of the Strategies of the conference,” explained facilitator Loukina T. “Thank you for being interested in process!”

**Footnotes:**

1 (SMILE – for Summer Meeting in Lausanne Europe)

2 1972 was the year of the Stockholm Conference, which brought together Environment Ministers from countries around the world to discuss the dangers posed by the prevailing growth-oriented economic model and population growth patterns.

3 Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, an organ of the United Nations

4 Radio Télévision Suisse, publié lundi 5 août 2019 à 19 :57 (Darius Rochebin)

5 Michel Onfray TV: @MichelOnfrayTv

6 20 Minutes, publié le 21/07/19 à 22h10 — Mis à jour le 22/07/19 à 10h35

7 James Moore, The Independent, 3 August 2019

8 Radio Télévision Suisse, publié lundi 5 août 2019 à 19 :30 (Darius Rochebin)

9 “The Emperor’s New Clothes”, by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen.

10 Ted Talk, ‘The disarming case to act right now on climate change’, November 2018

11 Radio Télévision Suisse, publié lundi 5 août 2019 à 19 :57 (Darius Rochebin)

12 idem

13 Pascal Riché, L’OBS, 22 juillet 2019


15 and already a little bit before the press conference, in the morning

16 This ‘sign language’ is the same as is used by youth and adult peace movements meeting in Geneva, Switzerland and in other countries.
A proposal is accepted by fluttering of hands ... after opportunities for Clarification, Strong Opposition or Feeling Uncomfortable (all through sign language).
Independence
We shall be independent from any political or business based influence. To differentiate between outside help and outside influence is left to national and local branches on a case by case basis.

We recognize the importance of donations and crowdfundings - being transparent is essential. However, we do not want to be instrumentalized and will not support anyone or any organization in return.

Purpose
Our demands are based on reliable data and scientific facts. It's not our responsibility to come up with solutions.

We recognize that the problems of the climate crisis we are facing today come from flaws in our socio-economic system, change is needed.

Day 4: Proposal on Independence and Purpose accepted.
Summit process had decision-making challenges and faced them

“We don’t want the Old World knocking on our door”

by MCP

Day 2 (Tuesday) was a particularly challenging day as participants had difficulty reaching decisions and the process suffered, too. In some ways, it could be said that the young attendees faced, amongst themselves, some of what adults experience at international meetings where many different countries (governments) are represented.

“We had a meeting on Tuesday that was not very constructive. Participants thought differently about things and just stuck to their positions,” noted Astrid B., from Denmark.

“The hosts felt a kind of obligation to produce something,” explained another participant, África C., from Catalunya, Spain. “But afterward the goal of producing a final document that everyone agreed on was deemed less important. As the moderator said, what we are aiming to publish is an open document, which people from different countries can adhere to or not. It is not definitive, it’s an evolving document.”

However, in her opinion there are some core things that shouldn’t be changed. “The rest, yes – it will evolve.”

She added that the negative thing that she personally had noticed was the existence of some ‘closed groups’. “No one knew they existed. We were not informed, in order to take part. In the future we need information in advance,

1 (youth organizers from Lausanne)
from each part of the world. But then, it hasn’t been possible here for lack of time.”

The summit process saw a positive turn by Day 4. By then there had been an evolution, according to Astrid. There was “more pragmatism”, people were much “more selective” about which points they absolutely wanted adopted with (their) exact wording, the organizers learned to prioritize, and participants began to “practice the Art of Compromise”.

As Micaël M., moderator of the Open Plenary on Thursday said, “Recently I have noticed the Old World (creeping in) ... There has been stress, not listening, deadlines, pressure to produce something, etc.”

“Is the destination more important than the journey?”
he asked, in a poignant moment of the plenary.

“Let us remember there is no leader here ... only a movement of people who are bonding together, a sense of community developing ... There are almost 500 people here, 500 different viewpoints. In my opinion, the document is not the most important thing. We don’t want the Old Non-democratic World to knock on our door.”

The moderator proposed a set of breathing and visualisation exercises to induce a ‘zen’ feeling and attitude, with eyes closed, and the auditorium went quiet and most of the youth closed their eyes and took part in the exercise.

Later in the afternoon the young people went back to work, and some proposals were adopted without changes, while many others were placed in a separate working document for further input from the field (back in the respective countries).
IPCC former Vice-Chair Jean Pascal van Ypersele spoke to participants publicly the same afternoon and the next day, subtly acknowledging some of the difficulties they had faced during the week. “Sixty of you were in a workshop where you watched the live press conference presenting the 25th IPCC report,” he said. “The people who prepared the report didn’t get much sleep over the past days.. for the same reasons as you! They couldn’t agree on things..”

He nevertheless heaped praise on the youth, noting that it is easy to put an IPCC report in a drawer but that a young person looking into the eyes of a policy-maker is not so easy to put in a drawer.
Professor Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, climatologist, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) speaks to youth participants regarding his own ‘strike’ from university classes to come to Geneva in 1979 for the first UN-level climate conference.
We have crossed the 1 degree line”, Professor van Ypersele stated, “and the link between the increase in CO2 and the increase in heat waves, for example, that we have had over the past few weeks, is there. If you wish to inform yourselves more, you can look in my website where there are hundreds of slides and figures.”

He explained to the audience that the CO2 increase is like the increase of a layer around the earth. “This helps us understand, without complicated climate models, that we must stop increasing that thickness. Each layer is like a new sweater … there is sweater 1, sweater 2, sweater 3… We must take off the sweaters! It is simple, at least from a scientific point of view, to get to zero. According to the IPCC it is technically and economically possible to change the situation. What is written in invisible ink in the report, however, is something that is needed to connect the two aspects. What is that? Political will! Of course, changing habits is very difficult.”

A student raised his hand and asked:

“Where does political will come from, what is it?

It is important to know this, since that is what we must work on…”

Van Ypersele replied: In democracies, at least, the elected officials, and the people who vote making clear what they want, are the political will. “In most cases, however, political ‘leaders’ are not leaders. They follow what the people in the street want.”

In conclusion, the IPCC former vice-chair stated: “The way things are produced, distributed and consumed in our economy is unsustainable. Still, I am energized, I feel as if I’ve had a bain de jouvance (from your work here). Your energy, your consciousness and your determination are inspiring. You adopted a set of consensus points about Values and Demands, and you elaborated

2 www.climate.be/vanyp
many other items for youth around the world to pick and choose which they wish to pursue (…). Thank you very much, please continue your work. I have no time (left)."

A special word was reserved for the young girl who has inspired the participants and many others who strike for the climate on Fridays in their countries:

“I would like to thank Greta in particular, I know she is not a leader, she does not want to be … but she launched this movement. Greta, ignore the criticism, the bad people who are inventing excuses to deflect from their inaction. I thank you.”

Profile on a Participant

“All change has to be initiated by a few brave people”

by MCP

Astrid B. (24, Denmark) recalls she had her ‘ecological awakening’ when she was about 12 years old. “I got interested in conservation and started writing emails to members of parliament, politicians. I had read information published by WWF online.” Amazingly, she did all this at the ripe old age of twelve alone. “I was used to doing things on my own.”
A few years later she participated in school clubs addressing issue of civics, world citizenship, etc. Her school – the International School of Uganda – offered students the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme, which asked students to serve the community in a project of their choice for a required number of hours. Without this social component, a student couldn’t graduate.

“That really changed me. I had always thought that in school, there was on the one hand the ‘centre’ (all the classes in the curriculum) and on the other hand, the so-called ‘fun-side’: sports, art, civics, etc. Here, it all came together. The IB taught me that I also needed to have a fulfilling life, to do something outside of myself.”

Astrid describes herself as seeing the world differently thanks to the IB programme. “When you want to change something, you need a few people to go out and do it first. Then others will see: ‘Hey, this is not so strange.’ All change has to be initiated by a few brave people.”

But.. striking from school? Is that really acceptable? “That’s the way social/grassroots movements function,” she insists. “They have to do something visible. The action (a strike, for example) raises the social cost of continuing to do business as usual. Otherwise people can just ignore the action. Of course – there should be boundaries.”

Astrid explains that before the climate strikes there wasn’t too much of a conversation about the climate situation. “How much were people really talking about it? It has to take up space!”
Astrid B. (24, Denmark) describes how the International Baccalaureate (IB) helped her see “it was necessary to do something outside of myself.”
Day 5 – Participants SMILE in advance of the Climate March, despite a sobering discussion on the topic of “climate anxiety” (a growing phenomenon among young people).
Two generations mingle at the SMILE summit in Lausanne: Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, 62 and Finlay Pringle, 11.
Day 5, Summit organiser Kamel M. answers questions from the media during closing event.
Food for Thought
No Words Needed.
#ActNow

How do you react to climate sceptics?

Jacques Dubochet (77)  
Nobel Prize Winner

Your face, when somebody tells you, you're too young to change the world?

Astrid (13)  
Student from Denmark

How do you describe the relation between humans and nature?

Elijah (16)  
Student from England

You will strike, until...?

Jakob (16)  
Climate Activist from Germany

No words needed
Closing remarks after the week-long event.