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## Living on the Edge: Young People, Social Work and Climate Policy and Action

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### Abstract

*Today's young people will be on the frontline of experiencing the worst effects of the climate crisis as they age in a world in which climate-induced disasters will be increasing in intensity and frequency unless 'net zero' is reached before the current deadline of 2050. The case for urgently addressing the climate crisis by 2030 has been made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) since the Paris Agreement in 2015. Years later, and with the disappointing outcomes of the 2021 United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) 26 meeting in Glasgow, Scotland and COP27 in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt in 2022, little has changed. Politicians fill the airwaves with fine words about reaching 'net zero'. Meanwhile, countries like India, the 3rd largest polluter do not aim to meet 'net zero' until 2070! Young people have limited engagement in formal policy-making locally, nationally, and globally, so their voices remain largely ignored. Practitioners, seldom engage young people in climate action. This professional disinterest in young people's experiences of the climate crisis and aspirations for a net zero future must end. This article focuses on young people's voices, research and action, including their involvement in COP26 activities in Glasgow. Young people, as agentic persons, can make decisions about climate change, and are well-placed to do this if given the opportunity. Social workers can support and mobilise young people in climate action and demand that climate change be included in the social work curriculum.*

**Keywords:** *climate action, climate change, climate crisis, COP26, young people, empowerment, social work education*

### Introduction

Young people growing up today will be living on the edge, that is, on the frontline of experiencing the worst consequences of the climate crisis as they age. The world they will inhabit will be buffeted by climate-induced disasters that will be increasing in intensity and frequency unless 'net zero' is reached before 2050 (IFRC, 2022). 'Net zero' refers to each nation-state seeking to reach a balance between the greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere and those taken out of it. This goal has not been reached and the climate crisis is the consequence. Hence, extreme weather events have risen by 35% since the 1990s and killed 410,000 people in the past decade, mainly in low and lower middle-income countries (IFRC, 2022). Moreover, between 2010 and 2020, the IFRC (2022) has calculated that 83% of all disasters were triggered by natural hazards caused by extreme weather or climate-related events. Despite the 2050 deadline, the urgency of addressing the climate crisis requires that crucial action is taken now. The criticality of this crisis was highlighted in a Special Report made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2018), delivered during the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP). At the COP21 meeting in Paris in 2015, the IPCC Report advised that to avoid calamitous extreme weather events, global warming had to be limited to 1.5°C by 2030. This warning remains largely unheeded. Years later, and with disappointing outcomes in COP after COP, little has changed, except that politicians have delivered fine promises of change more skilfully and proliferated them more widely. Meanwhile, extreme weather

events such as wildfires have crossed all continents, but notably in Australia, the west coast of North America (Canada and the United States), and southern Europe where more and more hectares burn every year. Floods and droughts have increased in frequency and intensity, as exemplified during the 2022 Monsoon season in Pakistan, a low greenhouse gas emitting country that faced a flood that covered 10% of its land and affected 33 million of its inhabitants (CDP, 2023). The list of calamities is endless, and young climate activists are not only urging older people to take action immediately but are organising themselves to make their voices heard through the Fridays for Future Movement (Hasegawa, 2022). The lack of young people's voices at important climate change decision-making fora has not deterred young people, even some children in nursery school, from taking direct action. Neither of these two groups, nor the parents supporting them have refrained from direct action despite intimidation and threats of disciplinary action when they skip school to demonstrate against the climate crisis.

The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) has revealed that the warmest 20 years on record have occurred within the last 22 years and that the global temperature has already risen by 1.2°C above pre-industrial levels (WMO, 2023). In the summer of 2022, scorching temperatures were experienced throughout the Northern Hemisphere, and even England faced 40°C for the first time (Carrington, 2023). Other places like Jacobabad in Pakistan reached 51°C in March before the country became inundated with extensive flooding during the Monsoon season. These widespread floods devastated agriculture along with homes, leading to food insecurity for many of the 33 million people impacted by these floods (IFRC, 2022). Additionally, people living in small island developing states (SIDS) are watching their homes sink into the ocean as sea levels rise and storm surges further batter their shores and promote coastal erosion (Thomas et al., 2020). Hurricanes or cyclones and tornadoes cause further havoc in countries that are poorly prepared, e.g., the Philippines. Humanity is indeed living on the edge, and below the climate crisis lies the abyss of mass extinction including human civilization. Recognising this reality has prompted young people who will face the worst impacts of future climatic events to demand climate action now!

Despite the horrendous statistics, the four largest polluters seem oblivious to the urgency of resolving the climate crisis. China, the largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs) aims to reach 'net zero' by 2060 – a decade later than the 2050 deadline. The second largest emitter, the United States (USA), has said it will meet 'net zero' targets by 2050. India, the third largest emitter, and with the likelihood of its GHGs rising inexorably as it proceeds apace on fossil fuel based economic development and becomes the earth's most populous nation does not intend to reach 'net zero' until 2070 –two decades after the deadline. And Russia, the fourth largest emitter, aims to meet 'net zero' in 2060 (WMO, 2022). While such decisions are made by politicians, young people have had little opportunity to engage with formal policy-making fora at local, national, and global levels (Connon & Dominelli, 2021). Instead, they have taken to collective action through the Fridays for Future initiative, to make their voices heard. They have had mixed success. While the climate crisis proceeds apace (IFRC, 2022), young people have compelled several governments to declare a 'climate emergency' in which they pledge to take urgently needed action, e.g., in Scotland and England.

Nonetheless, youth movements have highlighted the importance of reducing fossil fuel usage in daily life and urged people to change individual behaviours. Worryingly, neither young people nor older people generally have taken additions to the climate crisis coming from the military into account. None of the calculations about GHGs consider the contributions made by the military of every country to global warming (Dominelli, 2012). The military in all countries, but especially those located among the largest emitters where the military consumes a significant proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP) and discharges military armaments into the atmosphere in wars, tests, and exercises is significant – 5.5 percent and excluded under 'military exceptionalism' (Weir, 2024). Similarly, the GHGs emitted by discharging armaments during civil wars and by terrorist movements have been ignored. The current War Against Ukraine initiated by Vladimir Putin on 24 February 2022 has perpetrated incessant daily bombardment of Ukraine. Firing Cruise and ballistic missiles has destroyed human life, Ukraine's flora, fauna, geographic terrain, and built infrastructures essential for daily life, including, housing, schools, grocery shops, theatres, hospitals, power, and communications systems. How much GHGs has Russia's invasion emitted into the atmosphere and how much has this contributed to global warming? The figures are significant, difficult to obtain, and constantly added to, including by new wars such as those in Gaza and Sudan. This issue is so important to environmental activists that they and other critics have called for such pollution to be called crimes against the environment (Dominelli, 2012), long before Putin's assault on Ukraine began. Now it is called 'ecocide' (Vargas, 2022). Some military organisations have engaged with such questions without revealing their contribution to GHG emissions, as narrated by Hermann (2022).

Such destructive and stark realities indicate that climate change as a significant multiplier of risks is causing great concern among young people. Some are becoming depressed about the failure of their

elders, especially politicians, to take seriously the current destruction of the planet that is accompanying the climate crisis and end it. For some young people this has led to ecogrief and suicides. Cunsolo et al., (2018) coined the term 'ecogrief' to describe the pain people feel over the destruction of the natural environment. Other young people have organised to resist societies' gross indifference to one of the most important social crises of contemporary times by demanding climate action. They have been inspired to act by the courageous Greta Thunberg of Sweden, who, aged 15, walked out of school on 20 August 2018 and protested outside the Swedish Parliament with a placard that demanded government action to end climate change. A few days later, on 26 August 2018, she was joined by other students, teachers and parents, and a school strike campaign took shape. Thousands of young people across the world have joined her, and now there is a social movement of young climate change activists. Formed on 18 September 2018, Fridays for Future (Hasegawa, 2022; Thunberg, 2022), is estimated to have 14 million members.

Young people are responding to Greta Thunberg's calls for regular school strikes on Fridays to continue to challenge adult inaction on climate change. A year later in August 2019, the campaign had acquired 3.6 million young followers based in 169 countries (Hasegawa, 2022). Greta Thunberg also demonstrates and joins protests. She is applauded for her plain-spoken and well-chosen words, like telling politicians that 'You have stolen all my dreams and childhood by your inaction'. In the United Kingdom (UK), young climate change activists led by Greta Thunberg who visited the UK and spoke to Parliament, succeeded in getting the Sturgeon government in Scotland (28 April 2019) and Drakeford government in Wales (29 April 2019), to declare a climate emergency. The UK government in Westminster subsequently declared the world's first official 'environmental and climate emergency' on 1 May 2019. Greta Thunberg also attended COP26 in Glasgow and led the marches against climate inaction there on two occasions. However, no substantive action has followed. And like Germany and the USA, the UK, has increased its use of fossil fuels in response to the exorbitant rise in fuel prices that make oil producers obscene profits, but are attributed to Putin's War Against Ukraine. On 13 March 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic began to bite, Thunberg's movement went digital with hashtag #ClimateStrikeOnline as the mobilising call for week 82 of the movement. Recently, Thunberg protested against the extraction and use of lignite coal from the Lützerath mine in Germany and was arrested for a short period. Alongside these mega-actions undertaken by young people are many important small-scale local actions (Chan et al., 2021). They should be applauded for engaging at both levels.

Some social workers have been supporting young people's activities for a while. For example, in the UK, Durham University and Stirling University have worked with schools to research and undertake developmental action on climate change, engage young people in seminar presentations, COP-based activities, and consciousness-raising initiatives at their schools. However, such initiatives must become more widespread within professional practice if they are to escape being categorised as a 'niche' activity for the few. Closures of youth centres and reduced employment of youth workers in England and Scotland have slashed the opportunities for young people to engage in climate action. Politicians must rectify the exclusion of young people from decision-making structures (Chan et al., 2021).

Young people grow into adults, and it will be interesting to see how these young climate activists behave in future. Greta Thunberg herself is a regular speaker on climate action, addresses her elders at climate change summits like UNFCCC COP meetings, and tells them with clarity how awful it is for many of the world's inhabitants to live with this inaction. She draws widely on the findings of climate science and has written her own book, *The Climate Book* (Thunberg, 2022), which was serialised for BBC's Radio 4. She has received several prizes and honours including being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Any monies she has received have been ploughed into climate change organisations to help them achieve their goals.

This article will consider young people's voices, drawing upon research and their actions including those I have undertaken with young people in Scotland, and to a lesser extent in England, including involving them in COP26 activities. I will be arguing that young people, as agentic persons, capable of making decisions about climate change are well-placed to do this if given the opportunity. I also claim that social workers, community workers and emergency practitioners can play critical roles by supporting and mobilising such groups. Also, I call upon all educators to include climate change in their curriculum across academic and placement settings.

## **Methodology**

This article is based mainly on conversations with young people involved in climate change activities through their schools and communities, previous research I conducted, internet searches of relevant articles, and the collection of the names of the most outspoken young activists appearing on the internet. It has not been funded by any agency.

## Results and Discussion

### ***Endorsing Young People's Micro-Level Climate Interventions***

Young people use self-generated actions to promote important dialogues and endeavours locally, nationally, and internationally (Hasagawa, 2022). Their initiatives display energy, creativity, and imagination. They have undertaken legal suits in their own jurisdictions to challenge and hold accountable, governments and firms for not ending the climate crisis. Young people are active in all countries of the world, especially at the local or micro-level (Hasagawa, 2022). I celebrate young peoples' stances and contributions, and praise residents, emergency personnel and practitioners that share young people's aspirations and dreams for a greener, more progressive world that cares for our beautiful planet.

The UK is composed of four nation – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, united in an island country governed from Westminster. The nation of Scotland and Wales run devolved administrations with their own ruling bodies and structures. Northern Ireland had its governance structures suspended for a period due to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), objecting to the Northern Ireland Protocol agreed with the European Union (EU). The lack of devolved powers for England is a glaring omission which confuses some living in England who assume that as the majority in the Westminster government, they speak for the entire country. Young people living in the UK have a Youth Parliament that has links with government at all levels. They use such possibilities to speak about issues that matter to them, including the climate crisis. The Youth Parliament represents young people aged 11 to 18 and is run by a Steering Committee. This is made up of one member of the Youth Parliament from each of the nine regions in England along with three members, one each from each devolved nation of the UK and meets at least 5 times yearly. The representatives on the Steering Committee are nominated by their region or nation to represent the views of the members of Youth Parliament nationally. They also approach service providers including those in the NHS and transport industry. Achieving 'net zero' is a campaign issue for the Youth Parliament (<https://www.byc.org.uk/uk/uk-youth-parliament>).

Young people as the future of humanity and current inhabitants of planet Earth are interested in climate change and will participate in events if given the opportunity. Such engagement can prepare them for assuming leadership roles when these become available. Young people, the leaders of tomorrow, have been engaged in local climate action through their schools, voluntary organisations, and collective and individual actions. Schools are significant because they can provide institutional continuity in the early stages of their lives. They are also known spaces in which young people can learn about the issues and think about age-appropriate activities. Schools can support them tackle the climate crisis as illustrated below.

#### ***Illustration from England***

England, through the Westminster government aims to achieve net zero by 2050; Scotland by 2045. Although young people's voices are seldom reflected in national governance structures, various local initiatives have engaged with them. For example, various academics at Durham University engaged with school children in 20 local schools to facilitate learning about climate change through their geography lessons. They used the traffic light system to define activities concerning contributions to GHG emissions. Those that were red had to be stopped, those that were green could proceed. The traffic light system was utilised by these young people to engage grandparents, parents, and siblings in discussions about climate change. In 2010, Durham County Council piloted the School Carbon Reduction Programme (SCRCP) to reduce energy consumption for heating school buildings. The SCRCP achieved considerable savings in 60 schools and was integrated into Durham County Council's Energy Management Service Level Agreement (SLA). Schools joining the SLA received billing advice and guidance on reducing energy consumption, and materials to enhance their understanding of energy usage and its impact upon climate change. The SCRCP programme was put out to tender in 2013. OASES was the successful bidder. Now renamed the ECO<sub>2</sub> Smart Schools, by two Durham County school children, this programme covers 240 schools in County Durham. It has saved schools money and reduced their carbon footprint. It provides the ECO<sub>2</sub> Smart Education Resources to assist with curriculum development and teaching. The programme has acquired the wider remit of lowering the carbon footprint of the entire county council estate.

By 2021, remote technologies altered the links between engagement with young people. When COP26 occurred in Glasgow, another innovation took root. Durham University enabled young people



to focus on soils as instruments of carbon storage and build terrariums to demonstrate how taking care of the soil increased carbon storage capacity, enhanced water retention, and improved plant growth, essential in food production. In COP27, the terrain shifted again. OASES, the climate change charity engaging schools across County Durham organised a conference at COP27. It involved 3500 students from over 100 schools in France, Spain, Italy, Costa Rica, Romania, India, Hungary, Egypt, and England during 2-3 November 2022 to address climate change issues in Sharm-el Shaik, Egypt as the ECO<sub>2</sub> COP27 Climate Conference. These young people used on online events to be more inclusive and enable students and others to join easily. Climate change experts from Durham University and Durham County Council sat on the Conference Panel to answer questions asked by the young attendees. The students considered how climate change would impact various ecosystems differently and how they could protect their home environments. Some participants described their school-based climate friendly initiatives. These included encouraging healthy eating, using locally grown food, planting trees in the school ground to preserve healthy soils, saving water, reducing plastic waste, recycling, and switching off the lights when not in use to reduce their carbon footprint. When the Conference ended, young people pledged to undertake specific actions to reduce GHG emissions in their communities. Their activities are described in the online *ECO<sub>2</sub> COP27 Legacy Booklet* (<https://eco2smartschools.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/Free+Resources/ECO2+Smart+Schools+Climate+Conference+Legacy+Booklet.pdf>). Their initiatives include promoting plant-based diets in the school canteens, recycling, and walking from home to school to reduce fossil fuel consumption for transportation. Such actions demonstrate that young people are agentic persons in encouraging dialogue and action.

This forum enabled young people to hear other young people, including those with indigenous heritages and learn how an interdependent world has economic links that intensify hardships for the poorest people on the planet, regardless of age.

### ***Illustrations from Scotland***

Scotland's 2009 Climate Change Act seeks to create an inclusive, peaceful, sustainable world wherein society respects and lives in harmony with nature. In reaching this goal, it anticipates clean air, unpolluted soils, clean water, and self-sufficiency in locally grown foods. Scotland aims to reach net zero by 2045, using its abundance of wind and tidal power to develop renewable energy (SG, 2021). The Scottish Government has missed its targets in reducing carbon dioxide for the past five years, so it needs to act with greater urgency across the nation to realise this goal. However, it has great examples of local initiatives on climate action. The Isle of Eigg in Western Scotland, produces all its energy through community-owned renewable sources. Young people have been active in specific campaigns. The 'Leave Scottish Oil in the Soil' was very vocal during COP26 activities.

The Scottish Government (SG, n.d.) provides educational resources for young people in schools through the National Improvement Hub. This Hub raises awareness about climate change and what can be done to mitigate the risks posed. Other local initiatives involve schools, their students, and others as partners in local action. Scotland's International Environment Centre (SIEC) illustrates an exciting development to achieve net zero throughout the Forth Valley economy in the counties of Stirling and Clackmannanshire to secure cleaner, greener ways of working. The University of Stirling plays a major role in delivering this initiative through the Stirling and Clackmannanshire City Region Deal. SIEC has substantial investments in the Young Pathfinders Programme (YPP) which began in 2021. Its 2022-23 cohort of 21 students were drawn from the Alloa Academy, Alva Academy, Dollar Academy, Dunblane High School, Lornshill Academy, St Modan's High School, and Stirling High School. They began work on 15 November 2022 and seek green solutions to the environmental problems that they identify locally and internationally and to assist Scotland reach 'net zero' by 2045.

In November 2021, Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, hosted COP26. It sought ambitious targets through agreements to keep the rise in temperature to no more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by 2030. To this end, Scotland promised to fund adaptation and prevention measures of £1 billion yearly, making payments to countries that were suffering disproportionately under climate change when they had contributed least to GHG emissions, and cutting methane emissions. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, head of the largest polluter in the world since 2005, did not attend COP26 due to his fear of catching Covid-19. Called the Covid Summit, the delegates attending COP26 had to provide a negative lateral flow test each day or take one at the site prior to

admission. It was a painless, efficiently run process, with many young volunteers providing free masks and lateral flow tests for all. Fortunately, no large-scale infection occurred at the site. Thus, absences by major polluters simply impeded progress. During COP26, Greta Thunberg led protest marches through Glasgow on two occasions. While COP26 brimmed with the energy of youth and hope, all were disappointed with the final outcomes. Greta Thunberg did not attend COP27 but lambasted the lack of achievements at both COP26 and COP27. Her depiction of these Summits as 'Blah, Blah, Blah' seemed apposite.

Meanwhile, more children from local schools in Scotland participated in climate change discussions. Even children in kindergarten demonstrated awareness of the issues. On the way to COP26, I spoke to an articulate 4-year-old sitting with his parents opposite me on the train about the lovely poster he had drawn to make his opinions known at the protests in Glasgow. He had created his own poster to carry on the march. It had planet Earth surrounded by hearts that summed up his views beautifully. It made me appreciate how very young climate activists will express their opinions when encouraged. He was delighted that I was suitably impressed, as were his parents. After all, I was a participant from the University!

Higher up the age scale, with the support of teachers and ethical approval, I had surveyed school children to ascertain their views about climate change. They were surprisingly well-informed about the topic and claimed to have obtained their information from school, parents, and the media. To me, this indicated significant interest in the topic. In some schools, the questionnaires had been administered before Greta Thunberg became a celebrity. I used these contacts to engage young people aged 15 to 18 in activities for COP26. These included building Terrariums and having three young volunteers and their head teacher join me in COP 26 and participate in events like Terrarium-building, Arctic tent, and explore exhibitions. I secured passes for the Green Zone which housed the exhibitions. I was unable to get them into the Blue Zone where I attended official deliberations. They found the exhibitions in the Green Zone fascinating and insightful.

At COP26, as a social work delegate for IASSW (International Association of Schools of Social Work), I organised an online exhibition to make visible social workers' activities on climate change, including climate awareness activities among young people. I arranged a side event seminar sponsored by IASSW and University of Stirling to give voice to young people. The seminar had a climate change animation created by students at the Zayed University in Dubai assisted by Professor Vishanthie Sewpaul. Vishanthie also gave an impressive keynote address that embraced the voices of young climate activists from Africa. Another highlight of the seminar was the video developed and presented by young people from the Alva Academy. They urged adults and other young people to engage in climate change activities. These covered eating less meat with at least one meat free day at school, recycling, walking to school, reducing fast fashion usage by reusing clothes, reducing food waste, reducing plastic waste, learning green skills, and establishing green champions. Young people's contributions at these events were awe inspiring.

Practitioners including those providing emergency services for flooding for example, in Scotland and elsewhere, can encourage young people to join organisations ranging from local groups in a community centre or school, a Youth Parliament nationally, and YOUNGO internationally. In the UK, young people are also campaigning in groups such as Extinction Rebellion. These activists want *change*, and they want change *now!* They demand transformative change that pulls society away from its dependency on fossil fuels. Other grassroots organisations include Young Friends of the Earth Scotland (YFoES), composed of young people aged 16 to 30. They are committed to socially just climate transitions, and linked to Young Friends of the Earth, Europe. YFoES provides spaces for young people to discuss ideas, share skills and access resources for their activities; respond to both local and global issues; attend training sessions; support young people's campaigns; and seek to convince policymakers to listen to their ideas and involve them in making decisions. Training sessions can be face-to-face or online. The YFoES Manifesto on Climate Change has an impressive anti-oppressive stance towards intersecting forms of oppressions that need to be addressed in achieving a just and inclusive transition to net zero (FoES, 2022).

### **Young People's Representation Internationally**

YOUNGO, formed in 2009 by various NGOs, engages young climate activists under 35 years old in shaping climate change policies internationally, particularly in UNFCCC COP processes and activities. YOUNGO's commitment to global inclusivity and collaboration includes a flat organisational structure, consensus decision-making, and working groups with representatives from the Global South

and Global North. One Focal Point from each of these two areas is elected to hold discussions externally, and engage in UNFCCC COP activities and discussions. In 2021, YOUNGO organised young people's COP26 activities in Italy before coming to Glasgow. YOUNGO representatives are articulate, well-informed opinion-formers, contributors to policy discussions and activists demanding accountability for political (in)actions. Whether listening to or discussing with YOUNGO representatives. I have been impressed by their understanding of the issues, commitment to inclusion and equality and genuine commitment to transforming this world into a better one. YOUNGO's main concerns revolve around developing activities such as: climate change awareness, knowledge and capacity building; collaborative and cooperative social networks; advocating and lobbying for effective climate change policies; and climate change activities for young people to pursue. YOUNGO activists believe in the power of grassroots action in delivering well-informed initiatives to address climate change and enhance sustainable development.

YOUNGO emphasizes that a paradigm shift is needed to move societies away from dependence on fossil fuel-based production and consumption and has argued for this since 2016. Their interventions during COP26 were inspiring. In COP27, there was a Young and Future Generations Day which celebrated young people's achievements through the power of their own autonomous organisation and participation in UNFCCC activities. YOUNGO also organised side events, workshops, and festivities to showcase their innovative work and high ambitions in solving the climate crisis. During the Young and Future Generations Day, young people held an Intergenerational Inquiry on Climate Change that enabled many young participants from all over the world to join online. YOUNGO representatives also meet the UNFCCC Executive Secretary, key negotiators, scientists, and others to discuss their role in the UNFCCC developments, and other issues of concern. During COP meetings, YOUNGO also engages in interactive 'Youth Briefings' where they meet with the UNFCCC's Executive Secretary, Chairs of Negotiating Bodies, and COP President to ask questions for 30 minutes. Between COP Summits, YOUNGO participates in various preparatory meetings in Bonn where UNFCCC is housed. In these meetings, YOUNGO representatives argue strongly for human rights-based responses to climate issues, and for the greater involvement of young people in the UNFCCC's negotiating and decision-making processes. In instances where they are blocked from participating, they seek allies among other UN agencies, e.g., UNICEF, to advocate for the greater inclusion of young people's voices in the proceedings. Such alliances were active during COP26 in Glasgow in 2021.

### ***Young Climate Activists Speaking Out Nationally and Globally***

Millions of young people globally are concerned about climate change and undertake local actions. These are significant, but seldom acknowledged outside their own localities. Some young activists have become well-known by speaking out nationally and internationally and engaging in global initiatives including the Fridays for Future Movement. A quick internet search for young climate activists revealed that among the most outspoken are:

Leah Namugerwa, has led campaigns to plant trees and ban plastic bag use in Uganda. She also initiated school strikes through Fridays for Future Uganda in February 2019. Leah Namugerwa's Birthday Trees Project encourages young people to plant trees for their birthdays by providing seedlings if they refrain from holding a party. She began the project by planting 200 trees on her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Through this group, she seeks to hold the Ugandan government accountable for its failure to carry out its obligations under the Paris Accord.

Anuna De Wever Van Der Heyden, a climate activist from Belgium, organised the first school strike for climate change there. She boarded the Regina Maris, a low-carbon trans-Atlantic ship, to attend the UNFCCC COP25 in Santiago, Chile. However, COP25 was transferred to Madrid, Spain, due to civil unrest in Chile. In 2020, Anuna De Wever Van Der Heyden completed an internship with the Greens–European Free Alliance in the European Parliament where she placed the views of young people on the table.

Jerome Foster II, a prominent young climate activist among Black and indigenous communities, has been the youngest Advisor to the American White House. He serves on the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council in the Biden administration. He also organises and attends the Fridays for Future in Washington, DC.

Haven Coleman from Denver Colorado in the USA was 13 when she co-founded US Youth Climate Strike as a non-profit organisation with fellow activists Alexandria Villaseñor and Isra Hirsi. They mobilised school strikes among students and questioned Democrat presidential primary candidates on climate issues. They also support the Green New Deal, and various socially oriented initiatives including calling for a moratorium on fossil fuel usage, and the declaration of a climate emergency in the USA.

Greta Thunberg from Sweden went on strike in front of the Swedish Parliament to demand climate action, aged 15. She quickly inspired young people across the world to take to the streets and go on school strikes. The resultant movement, Fridays for Future numbered 1.6 million in March 2019. According to Greta Thunberg, it aims to 'put moral pressure on policymakers, to make them listen to the scientists, and then to take forceful action to limit global warming'. This laudable aim is far from being achieved as COP27, or COP28, the latest of the UNFCCC 'talk-shops' demonstrated. The Fridays for Future movement has a website and Twitter (X) feed using the hashtags, #FridaysForFuture, #ClimateStrike, and #PeopleNotProfit. In November 2022, Thunberg and other climate activists from Sweden, initiated a lawsuit against the Swedish government for failing to tackle climate change. Thunberg refused to attend COP27 in Egypt to avoid being drawn into its 'greenwashing' antics.

Alexandria Villaseñor, a young Mexican American climate activist, founded and now heads an organization called Earth Uprising to educate and mobilise other young climate activists. Along with 15 other young activists, she petitioned the UN by filing a petition, Children vs Climate Crisis, aimed at holding countries to account for their contributions to the climate crisis. She has also edited, *All We Can Save*, a collection of essays written by women in the climate movement.

Alex Silva, a Mexican-Colombian climate activist studying environmental science, launched EcoTok using TikTok in 2020. EcoTok provides a platform for a collective of 19 people to initiate discussions about the climate crisis, encourage people to take action for a sustainable future and believe in change.

Yessenia Funes, a Salvadoran-American journalist, writes about the intersection of racism and climate change in a platform called Earther. She aims to protect the ocean and nature reserves.

Txai Surui is a young indigenous activist seeking to protect Brazil's Amazon. She told COP26 that the Earth speaks to people through the stars, moon, animals, and trees, but non-indigenous people do not listen. She also spoke of how one of her indigenous friends had been murdered for protecting Mother Earth. She called for decision-makers to centre indigenous people in their climate change discussions.

Licypriya Kangujam, a young climate activist from India, addressed COP25 in Madrid, Spain. She asked the attending Heads of State to take immediate climate action.

Regina Charumar, holds membership of the Geração Consciente (Conscious Generation), a group of young activists. She engages in climate action ranging from cleaning up beaches in Maputo City to developing environmental awareness in the capital of Mozambique.

There are many other similarly heroic young people. They are too many to list individually, but all those who take action to hold older adults, politicians and multinational companies to account should be applauded, whether their action is local, national, international or all three. There is only one planet, and it must be defended by everyone at all levels. Many young people are leading the way. Practitioners in the emergency services, social workers and community workers can mobilize alongside young people to achieve this wider agenda.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

### **Conclusion**

Climate change is one of the most pressing social issues of our time. Humanity is fortunate that young people are taking seriously the duty to care for planet Earth (Dominelli, 2012) by putting their energies into climate action that defends their futures and everyone's present. They have acted individually and collectively in self-organised groups and organisations, and sometimes with supportive allies, to hold adults, politicians, and entrepreneurs accountable for their indifference to the chaos caused by the GHG emissions that they have failed to control. They have emphasised how those who have contributed least to GHGs suffer the greatest number of deaths, threats of extinction, and destruction of many ecosystems. Such destruction has become commonplace, but the worst polluters remain unmoved.

### **Suggestions**

Asia is particularly challenging as a region. It has the world's largest populations, largest polluters, and small island developing states who are suffering the worst consequences within it. The ASEAN group within that region includes a range of wealthy countries like Singapore and poor ones like Myanmar, each contributing differently to the climate crisis and experiencing different impacts. It deserves an article in its own right. However, politicians in the ASEAN region as elsewhere must engage with the climate change agenda, reduce fossil fuel usage immediately, and demand that other politicians act to ensure that the largest polluters undertake remedial action that will benefit not only their populations, but all peoples globally. The urgency of taking radical measures to transform the ways humans produce and consume goods and services has been highlighted by young climate activists



more than once. They have demonstrated that despite 'living on the edge', they have the foresight, vision and determination to act as agents demanding an end to the climate crisis. It is not only young lives that are at stake, but the lives of all living beings, human civilisation and the whole of this magnificent planet - Earth. If adults fail to heed them, humanity places everyone and everything in peril. The time to act on young people's concerns about the climate crisis is now!

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