

The climate is us

A letter to everyone

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The climate is us

This is a letter that does not exclude anybody. We want to appeal to everyone, because the climate affects us all, without exception. This letter is intended for politicians, for our parents' and grandparents' generation and for our own. It's a letter to everyone and we hope that everyone will read it. Yes, we can already hear you telling us that hope is naive. But let that be our strength. We won't be distracted by everything people say about the climate, what they promise or what they conceal. We look at the facts. The child in the fairy tale who says the emperor has no clothes is naive. Today's climate policy is just as naked. That's our accusation.

But we also believe in growth. In this letter we'll explain why and what that growth means to us.

We've started small; it would hardly be possible to start smaller. There were two of us. Our protest began at the kitchen table. 'Now we're going to do something,' we said to each other. But someone was ahead of us, someone who had started even smaller; entirely on their own. We looked at Greta Thunberg, the brave schoolgirl from Sweden, who started a Friday strike.

Imagine how much courage and willpower you need to go and sit outside the Swedish parliament as a fifteen-year-old all on your own with a sign saying, 'School strike for the climate'. At that point she had already shown more courage than many politicians in their entire term of office. In December 2018 she was invited to the Katowice climate change conference, where two hundred world leaders assembled to discuss the consequences of climate change. She was given one minute to speak and said, 'If a couple of children can make the front pages all over the world by skipping school, imagine what we can achieve all together.'

In Belgium, the country where we're growing up, the climate march organised by Claim the Climate walked the streets of Brussels on 2 December. There were well over 65,000 people. The newspapers said this was the biggest climate demonstration ever. One of our four climate ministers in Belgium – yes, we really do have four in this small country – said she would take our concerns to Katowice. Minister Marghem herself had marched along with that climate protest against the lack of ambition in her own policy, then had herself photographed in the private jet with which she travelled to the climate conference, and when she arrived she told everyone that Belgium refuses to

participate in the 'High Ambition Coalition' – the countries aiming to be more ambitious in their fight against the consequences of global warming.

We stared at our laptop.
No, this was no joke.
This was real.

Do you see the contrast between that girl from Sweden and this Belgian minister? That was the moment at the kitchen table when we, Anuna and Kyra, looked into one another's eyes and said to each other: enough is enough.

We're going on strike.
We'll skip school.
We'll engage in civil disobedience.

On Thursday 10 January we set off for Brussels. The police had allocated us a small square in advance. We made a video clip that went viral, sent out appeals on social media, our mobile phones became our greatest weapons and journalists wrote about us: the following Thursday two girls from Mortsel went on strike for the climate. We checked Google Earth. We let the police know that the little square would probably be too small. We were allocated the Europakruispunt near the Central Station. On 10 January there were 3000 of us, and even that square was crowded.

On 17 January there were 12,500.
The following week 35,000.

And then came another climate march on Sunday 27 January. This time we went along ourselves, followed by camera crews and journalists. Again it was said that this was the biggest climate march ever: 75,000 people, but there were probably many more.

And now we're organising demonstrations all over Belgium.
The newspapers are full of messages about global warming.

All sorts of things have been set in motion.

But we still think of the kitchen table where our rage and our fear finally became our determination.

We took the initiative of protesting, to make our voice heard in Brussels. When to our great joy we saw that we had managed to motivate so many school pupils to continue to participate and that adults, too, were answering the call, we knew that it was about much more than pure protest.

It's about connection.
We're not alone. On this planet, none of us are.
We're all connected because of the earth which we share.

And we believe we should resolutely demonstrate that connection to one another, not just in the streets of so many cities, but also in this letter.

So many politicians, after all, have said so much, so many opinions have been expressed in newspapers and on TV. We've been asked to stay quiet, not to engage in civil disobedience, and to

have faith. We shouldn't panic either, we were told from all sides. That sounded pretty panicky itself, to be honest, as if we were the main ones with a problem and not the rest of society along with us.

The connection we're aiming for is rarely mentioned. The story seems not really to fit on news websites, in newspapers or magazines. At the start it became us against them. We see that as absurd. We want to talk about everyone here. Because even if it's important for us to be able to say a couple of things to 'you', to politicians, to our parents' generation or to people of our age, to us that 'we', that connection between all those groups, remains the most important point.

To the politicians and policymakers,

'You're doomsayers. You no longer believe in the future. You have no hope.' Shall we start there, dear politicians?

Our question is simply whether you take science seriously. Because science itself certainly takes its task seriously. It has been warning us for decades about the consequences of our lifestyle on this planet. If we were to completely stop CO2 emissions, from one day to the next, we would still feel the consequences of past generations' pollution and would continue to do so for a good twenty to thirty years before it got better. We're all like patients diagnosed with lung cancer. But it's worse than that. We're like people with lung cancer who refuse to stop smoking even after so many warnings.

Already with the current rise in temperature of 'only' 1 °C we are confronted with increasingly extreme weather, such as heatwaves, persistent drought and flooding. As the earth's temperature rises further, extremes will occur with increasing frequency. When the temperature rises more than 2 degrees, this greatly increases the likelihood of global warming becoming self-reinforcing, a kind of snowball effect so that it keeps on getting warmer. This means that there will no longer be a point at which we can stop climate change. That the earth's temperature will have risen so high that it will keep on rising, and that even if we completely stop emissions and pollution from one day to the next, we'll still be too late.

That's not opinion. That's science.

Whatever political explanation you want to give for it, in the end it comes down to us using up this planet to maintain an unrealistic way of life. We have long acted as if it couldn't run out, as if there was a reserve planet for whenever this one really no longer worked. But now you can't overlook it. The poles are melting, air pollution is surging and every summer forests go up in flames due to extreme droughts. The sources of our luxury are not inexhaustible. We'll have to adapt if the coming generations want the slightest chance.

When that realisation really kicks in, it's very difficult to get it out of your head. After all, how do you explain it all? Where are your explanations for cutting down all those trees to make way for industry, polluting our oceans for cruises, ruining our fertile soil, wasting water and intensively rearing animals to eat them? Our entire living environment is called into question and there's no way of justifying it. We've spoilt our life on earth. Poisoned it with tonnes of CO2. That overexploitation comes at a high price. The system that has done this is coming up against its natural borders.

We have known this for more than sixty years. But what does knowing mean here? It's taken decades for us to admit this knowledge into our consciousness. And all that time, all those long years, all those weeks, days and minutes, we have only continued to build on an economy based on growth and fossil fuels.

We recently had a conversation with climatologist Jean-Pascal Van Ypersele. Do you know how many subsidies go to fossil fuels annually and worldwide? Five thousand billion dollars. In Belgium the World Wide Fund for Nature has said that the government puts 2.7 billion euros a year into supporting fossil fuels. That doesn't even include tax incentives for company cars worth 900 million euros a year. We're paying for our own downfall.

We're using the planet like a credit card. We've kept on spending and spending, and forgotten that there's a bill to pay at the end of every month.

For years we've put off paying any of the real costs and continued to party. And now we're deep in debt. This is a debt to Mother Earth.

Of course we're scared.

How come you, politicians and policymakers, act like you're not?

Study, we're told, work with us on the future. You act like time hasn't become a luxury product, but remains something infinite. Perhaps even that's understandable. You all studied, we assume, with the impression that time was something you'd never really have to worry about.

Try standing in our shoes for a moment. Try to imagine what it means to live with the idea that time isn't infinite, that you're seventeen and a clock is ticking very loudly. Many of you probably already know that feeling. Many of you can think of things you still want to do, before it's too late because you're too old. But imagine hearing that clock ticking when you're young, when every adult tells you your life hasn't even begun yet.

Picture our world a moment, politicians and policymakers. Please take a moment to consider how we feel at this moment.

All sorts of things are expected of us. We should have faith, study hard and focus on our future. You're very concerned about that, but that future almost looks like it will play out in a castle in the air, or rather: in a society with no climate problem. When we start talking about global warming, you ask us to have 'faith'. 'There's so much being done,' we're told. 'With a bit of effort here and there, it'll all be fine.' Your optimism is remarkable, because at this moment it's diametrically opposed to what the climate reports are telling us all.
