
Climate anxiety, generational rage:

The disgruntled youth take centre stage

By Elana Astrud Kroneberg

The mood among the youth is burning red-hot and getting even hotter as the planet heats up. Those who have inherited our climate catastrophe are speaking out loudly and the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) believes we must listen carefully to what they have to say. Young Climate Voices (YCV) is IFAA's new social media and digital platform for sharing the views of young people in Cape Town, in South Africa and beyond. The project, to be launched soon, calls on young people to 'tell your stories, amplify your voice'. ELANA ASTRUD KRONEBERG gives a taste of what they have to say.

*We say, no more 'blah, blah, blah.' No more exploitation of people and nature and the planet. No more whatever the f**ck they're doing inside there. We're sick and tired of it, and we're gonna make*

the change, whether they like it or not.

– Greta Thunberg, Swedish climate activist, outside COP26.

What do you think the media picked up in Greta Thunberg's public statement? The profanities of course. Looking past her message by focusing on her use of language is a deliberate choice to frame her as angry and incoherent.

I find it strange that when young people speak out in anger, adults often don't listen to what they are saying, but rather to how they are saying it. Meaning gets confused in the heat, things get lost in the fire. Reason, rationality, keeping your head and staying calm is *cool*. Anger, expletives and emotionally charged threats are hot. Right? Red-hot. We are meant to stay cool; it's easier to deal with.

But meanwhile guess what is also red-hot and getting hotter? The planet. We are not the only ones burning up.

Greta speaks for the deforested land, the acidifying oceans, the disappearing bees and the people poisoned by fossil fuel exploitation. At 18-years-old, Greta Thunberg speaks for us, expressing a generational rage that is fitting for our times. The temperature of red-hot anger, I feel, expresses the state of the atmosphere more clearly than the cool and calculating reason used by those inside the COP26 conference. To this day, this cool detachment of the UN's

Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), better known as the Paris Agreement, has done very little to cool the planet.

Instead of banning further fossil fuel exploration and phasing out existing fossil exploitation, the most powerful interests at the COP proceedings have put forward solutions such as planting enough trees to suck the CO₂ out of the atmosphere. Scientists warn there aren't enough trees in the world to offset society's carbon emissions – and there never will be. If relying on nature isn't enough, another suggestion is an air capture device that sucks carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, a technology already underway in Hokkaido, Japan.

The Climate Justice Charter Movement (CJCM) held a protest outside Parliament in Cape Town during COP26 demonstrating that young people, much closer to home, feel exactly as Greta does. This generational rage is a national, global mood and it is taking centre stage. And so, I focus on mental health among the youth, a world-wide pandemic as threatening as Covid-19.

Young Climate Voices is a new IFAA project, which was kickstarted by interviewing young people at the protest to share their views on the soon-to-be-launched social media platform. In preparation, I created a "climate anxiety lucky packet" of cue-cards as a conversational starting point. The young protesters were

asked to pick one from a range of cards labelled “depressed,” “anxious,” “angry,” “overwhelmed” and so on, to reflect their views on climate change.

Many chose “angry,” others chose “overwhelmed,” while some selected “pessimistic” (“because we’re all gonna die,” said one protester). A Stellenbosch student, however, chose “optimistic,” – the only positive card I had for the pack because “I believe that I can make a change,” she said.

But overall my sentiments were confirmed. Young people are angry and many feel totally overwhelmed, simply because of the enormity of the problem.

We’ve all been there: on the eve of the exam, we are filled with anxiety as the clock begins to tick down, while the chapters in the textbook appear more and more ominous. It’s overwhelming, but in the end it’s our anxiety, our utter panic at the thought of failing, which gets us through.

But anxiety overload, nervous system activation, comes at a price. A crash. We need a chance for our systems to recover. We are not designed to live under chronic stress, bombarded by stressors every single minute of every day. Chronic stress is something brand new to the animal kingdom.

An eland runs from a lion in the savannah, narrowly escaping death. Anxious, fearful, the eland’s survival mode is activated, sending adrenalin to every muscle in its body. Fight or flight? The eland flees. Once the lion tires and the eland takes shelter, it shakes its body vigorously, releasing the tension stored in its muscles, releasing the flood of excess adrenalin in its system. And off it goes in search of grass to graze or whatever it is that elands do to chill.

Humans are rarely able to shake off that adrenalin before the next stressor hits our system. So much about modern living is a stress – the toxins in our food, the plastics in our oceans – bringing so many risks and hazards. Climate crisis is a stress we are all faced with. It’s a stress we all have to deal



with, and it grows ever more real, its threat ever greater. This is not paranoia it’s really going to happen.

Young people, including generations unborn, are the inheritors of the climate catastrophe, created by a system we did not design. It is with us now and it will worsen with time if something isn’t done to curb the race to the bottom. Both climate scientists and climate alarmists agree.

More youth are becoming enraged, depressed, anxious, overwhelmed, powerless, cynical, suspicious and disengaged. Is this the worst time to be alive and young? Hundreds of young people stood outside the gates of the South African Parliament shouting:

What do we want?
Climate justice!
When do we want it?
Now!

It reminded me of myself 10 years ago, standing in the same place, a 21-year-old Environmental and Geographical Science student, protesting against fracking. I remembered the older people who

inspired me and shaped me into the person I am today. There I was, witnessing a fresh cohort of young people saying the same things I said 10 ten years ago (“The South African government are carbon criminals!” I shouted along with the crowd). But now they say it with more urgency, more rage and yes, more flair. We get better with time because we learn from those who came before us. With South Africa’s long history of struggle we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Yes, it is all doom and gloom, and we are no closer to solving the climate crisis than we were before COP26. However, “negative” emotions have always been a force for change because activists don’t only fight because something is wrong. They also fight because they see what lies on the other side of their rage: another world that is possible.

In these times of climate crisis, young people all around the world take their righteous anger, the baton of generational rage, to centre stage. And, just as Greta said, we also tell the world: “You can shove your climate crisis up your a**e.” **NA**