Chapter 1: What the Climate Strike Movement is About

The compass

What is it all about? That is the question I ask Loukina Tille and Isabelle Axelsson in summer 2020, when we look back at the first two years. The two of them are among the young people who have made the global movement possible. By now, they have begun their degrees in climate studies at the ETH in Zurich and human geography at Stockholm University. They have been involved in the movement since December 2018; they joined when they were still at school, got in touch with each other already very early on in the global chats, and met for the first time in Strasbourg in March 2019, together with sixty other young Europeans, shortly before the first global strike. Later, they took part in the World Economic Forum together in Davos. And it was partly thanks to them that four hundred young activists gathered to develop the movement further at the Smile meeting in August 2019.

If somebody – without knowing about the new climate movements – wanted to build a movement to change the world and unite millions of people in the fight against the ecological and climate crisis, which principles would they decide on? What should be at the core, guaranteeing that hundreds of thousands of people want to join, and ensuring that it is also quite clear why and how our societies have to change? What kind of movement have the young people actually created?

The Fridays For Future document which comes closest to being an explanation of their principles is the Declaration of Lausanne. However, as it was written only by mainly white young Europeans from 28 countries, it does not claim to speak for the whole movement; Isabelle and Loukina also emphasise that. But it is a good starting point for a better understanding of the basic issues.

During these weeks in summer 2020, I think about the fact that Greta and her fellow activists could have sat down in front of their school; they could have adopted a political program, and they could have represented an NGO or founded a new one. But they didn't do any of those things, and instead concerned themselves with the core of democracy. They call attention to the publicly funded research institutions of democracy, the universities with their academic researchers, and from the beginning they have been thinking globally, drawing everyone in with the hashtag and the English name. And the basis they start from is the document, the Paris Agreement, which all countries have in principle already signed and recognised. What they are demanding from the world is nothing radical, but is only what was already promised to them and not delivered.

In Lausanne, they summarise this as follows:

1. Keep the global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees compared to pre-industrial levels!
2. Ensure climate justice and equity!
3. Listen to the best united science currently available!

The demand to "follow the science"

The fact that the biggest environmental movement in history has agreed on these exact principles is not something to be taken for granted. What does "listen to the science" actually mean, I ask Loukina and Isabelle. And what is "climate justice"?

"We begin from the facts about the ecological crisis and the climate crisis; that's our starting point. We are not primarily concerned with opinions or convictions, like other movements or parties. We start with the crises, their scientific background, and the knowledge that they are bad for our future and are already doing damage now. Humans and animals are suffering and will continue to suffer." These facts about the world cannot be explained away. That is why the young activists start from that point. "For the people who call that into question or deny it," says Loukina, "we can explain that the context behind the crisis has been demonstrated scientifically again and again. This is about the laws of nature. And those are different from subjective beliefs. There is an essential truth beyond our wishes." Of course, people can be wrong, even scientists, I think to myself, but with our attempts at explanation we can get

better at approaching the world. And with "follow the science", the movement means above all the fundamental research, not every opinion expressed by every scientist. That is why the special report IPCC-1.5 is so important for these activists. It was published by the UN right at the beginning of the strike as the politically legitimised result of hundreds of research groups, and it shows why it is so important not to surpass 1.5 degrees of global warming, not least because otherwise potentially disastrous tipping points could be reached. The activists are referring to this consensus in the scientific community when they talk about following the science.

"Nature is something that lies beyond us human beings and beyond our projections. We can't suddenly say that there's no more gravity, or that higher levels of CO2 don't cause global warming. It's really about molecules and their behaviour. And they always behave the same way, again and again," Loukina continues. "But in Europe and in the world at the beginning of the 21st century, we have rather a self-centred attitude, which means that people are quite confused when they're confronted with something that is beyond them and doesn't depend on their opinions. And doesn't fit into the algorithms that are tailored to them by social media. They often push the facts away and ignore them." But is it necessary for all people to understand the fundamental science behind the climate crisis before they can react to it? Or is the point that they should at least recognise the facts? "I don't even understand all the scientific processes, and I'm studying them at university," says Isabelle. "But I understand the correlation between our emissions and global warming, which then in turn leads to possible disasters. Not many people will actually understand the chemistry and physics behind all of that, but we should recognise the consequences of our actions. In that sense, everyone has to understand what we cause when we (as humanity) produce emissions, on an individual and a systemic level." "Yes, exactly, and it's also the task of scientists to communicate that," adds Loukina.

But again, I insist: isn't it astonishing that the whole movement agrees on this motto, "Listen to the science," and directs people to the universities? "It's also a reaction to demands which are too specific," explains Isabelle. "The point is, it's not about our opinions or about party politics. It's about understanding the crisis as a whole and realising that we are changing the 'earth system', and that we have to stop doing that quickly. It also gives us legitimacy. We're not claiming that we have all the answers. We're pointing to the research. And we're saying to politicians: hey, you have to respond to this knowledge which is recognised at the universities as institutions that are accepted as publicly funded parts of the democratic system, and you have to translate it into real

life, through the appropriate measures." "And that would mean," Loukina continues the thought, "that politicians accept that this kind of research exists, and that we can't just claim that something else is true and refuse to take responsibility for the state of the world. We have to push back against this kind of relativism, the way people don't actually argue or attempt to get a better understanding of the world, but instead immediately claim that everyone has a right to their own version of the world. 'Listen to the science' is a way of countering that." It starts a conversation, I think to myself, it calls on people to work together to get a clearer perspective and look at the world more closely – and to build the democratic process of decision making on this exchange.

The demand for "climate justice"

And how does the demand for climate justice relate to all that? How does it come into play? After all, we can understand that the young activists want to insist that governments follow the Paris Agreement and the science such as the IPCC-SR-1.5 report, which says exactly what it means to keep global warming below two or one and a half degrees. That we basically cannot produce any more emissions. But we can imagine climate and environmental movements – such as Extinction Rebellion, for instance – demanding this without going into the dimension of justice. "That has to do with the way the world works," says Isabelle. "That all aspects are connected. If we only focused on one political measure or demand, we'd immediately see that this is not enough to deal with the climate crisis. There are so many aspects contributing to the crises that you soon see that it's a whole system; these things are connected." Isabelle and Loukina point to our societies, how we eat, how we dress, how we transport things and how all of that is connected; but also how our behaviour in the Global North is connected with the situation in the Global South. "For example, the overconsumption of clothes and habit of entrusting big companies to 'recycle' them in countries such as Sweden in reality contributes to landfill and pollution in countries like Ghana, negatively affecting the life quality of the locals."

"We have to organise the transformation in a fair way. Otherwise, it will hit the people who already have the least say the hardest," says Isabelle. "They are the people who have already been treated unfairly for a long time, and who already suffer from the situation." "So many things are really connected with everything else in this global economy, in the way we've built it up since the industrial revolution and colonisation. A change that would be as drastic as the

one we need now could also have very unfair consequences. Listening to the science and organising the transformation in a fair way means that we shouldn't just pay attention to a few countries or a few people, but to everyone, and organise it fairly and safely for everyone. Maybe that's also why Fridays For Future became a global movement so quickly, because this perspective was there from the beginning. To not only listen to the western science, but also to the people disproportionately affected by the climate crisis." "In Switzerland, we discussed the demand for climate justice for a long time," Loukina explains. "After all, at first it just looks like two concepts glued together. But it makes sense. We have to get from A to B quickly. The way we choose to go from A to B is in essence an ethical choice. We have to make sure that we keep everyone in view."

But what is justice? I think about the facts, such as the fact that each person should only be able to emit about 1.5 tons of CO2 per year if everyone in the world is allowed the same amount. This would mean that the richer Europeans would have to reduce their emissions by 90 percent within ten years. Instead, they want to use offsetting to buy their way out by paying poorer countries and maintain their standard of living. Is that fair? The most affected MAPA and BIPOC people are often emitting the least (see the chapters about the economy; and about intersectionality).

"The way you define justice is based on your values," says Loukina. "Yes, and different people have different values," adds Isabelle, "depending on their political philosophy." Does that mean that there is no shared understanding of climate justice? There is something like a fundamental understanding of the concept, both of them agree. That richer countries have to pay more than poorer countries, through something like "fair shares," and that they have to reduce their emissions more quickly (http://civilsocietyreview.org/report2018). And that there is something like a historical burden when it comes to emissions, but also the exploitation of the regions known as the Global South by the Global North in fossil societies for the last few centuries. And that the individual steps of changing society, which we all have to take together, must be arranged to protect people with fewer resources within each country, as well as people in the Global South. That also means financial reparations and help with the damage that has already occurred, and which continues to increase. Together with the other Mynttorget activists, Isabelle has already been in contact with Isak Stoddard, who has worked out a detailed model to calculate all these individual aspects of justice (Anderson et al. 2020).

"Obviously, different people have different concepts of justice," the two of them continue. "Some of them might emphasise that the state should guarantee everyone's freedom. Others would say, no, it's mainly about ironing out the unequal starting conditions and reacting to structural discrimination when it comes to gender, class, and ethnicity." "That is why it's important that Fridays For Future addresses all these dimensions. Young people with different value systems should be able to join. But it is difficult to understand why some people should have fundamentally better conditions than others; for instance, when it comes to overall CO2 emissions or ecological footprint. That's a question of dignity and decency."

"Within the movement, we also have to check the arguments again and again and challenge each other," says Loukina. "What does your freedom mean if other people's freedom is limited by your behaviour? Not all concepts of equality and fairness are equally good. We can make progress there. Seeing freedom as being based only on conscious decisions, for example, is too simplistic; what if there are options you know nothing about? We need philosophers who define concepts such as justice and freedom in a new way for our time, with the arguments that are relevant to the global climate crisis." "Yes, and it's about deciding criteria based on what we want to achieve. We can measure justice by that." "No one should suffer. Everyone should have a decent life. No one has the right to exploit others. Why should some people have it better than others, or live at other people's expense by using up a bigger share of the emissions pie?"

The connection between the three demands and the question of system change

So, all three demands are connected, I think to myself as I look back at our conversation. After all, the Paris Agreement says that the actions of individual states should be measured against criteria and principles of fairness and justice. All countries have committed to that, without taking it seriously so far, given the enormous emissions which continue to be accepted and hidden behind the concept of "net zero goals 2050".

"Follow the Paris Agreement and the science which explains what it means to keep global warming well under 2 and if possible 1.5 degrees, and put the principle of justice into action." What makes the construction of FFF's demands special is that each individual element looks innocent. Democrat-

ically legitimised politics (the Paris Agreement); science (IPCC-SR-1.5) and ethics (justice). But the combination of all three is so explosive! If we want to transform politics fairly in such a way that global warming and the ecological crisis are kept in check, we must reduce emissions in richer countries as fast as possible, while distributing power and guaranteeing everyone a decent life. That is tantamount to system change, a push for democratisation which the thousands of young activists are getting behind: attention must be paid to the needs of all people, power must be shared and influence on legislation has to be broadened through participation by larger parts of the population.

In these summer weeks, reports come in from the WMO, the UN's global organisation of meteorologists (WMO, 8.7.2020), saying that the temperature between June 2019 and June 2020 was already 1.39 degrees above the temperature in pre-industrial times, and that there is a 20 percent possibility that in the next five years at least one year will be more than 1.5 degrees warmer. The Paris Agreement can still be followed, but the pressure to stop emissions immediately is enormous.

"In Switzerland, we also discussed and introduced other basic demands," says Loukina. "System change is necessary if we want to transition to a just and sustainable global society. So, we also mentioned that system change might be needed. At the same time, we tried to enable as many people as possible to take part in the movement and still establish an internal compass. When it comes to defining and establishing that compass, we can keep developing better arguments." "Talking about systemic change or transformation is also sensible because it means recognising that social and political change has to be holistic," says Isabelle. "It's not enough to come along with a demand about farming." "But most people would probably still vote for parties that don't believe in that kind of system change or in making sure the principles of justice are put into action," says Loukina. "We have to understand their way of thinking and arguing, so that we can get them involved." How could system change come about on a just basis, the two of them wonder, and think back to what they experienced in Davos. We have to redefine economics and change our concept of a good life for everyone. Could that happen at a meeting of the most powerful people, like the World Economic Forum? Could those people design and realise a fairer and more sustainable system? "They have it much too good, they're stuffing themselves with chocolate in the Swiss mountains and they're never brave enough to aim for real change."

How will change come about? If it doesn't come from cliques of powerful people, where will it come from –governments? "Yes, this change could come

from governments," says Isabelle. "But only if populations, all of us, raise our voices."

Grassroots movements, court cases and the new spirit of the time

That is why grassroots movements are so important, I think to myself.

"They are put under pressure not to cling onto the status quo. It's much too easy just to carry on in the same way. We have to make them admit that this is an emergency. Bringing in laws through normal processes takes about five years. By then, we ought to have stopped emissions to an enormous degree. We can't go by the usual rules. We need a climate law immediately to really bring change. How is that supposed to work?" they ask. "I come back to the idea of citizens' assemblies, or something similar," says Loukina. "The way we tried it out in Davos. The public have to speak out and come together, show that we can come up with different rules. We can decide all together how we want to live and that we want to reshape the framework of our everyday lives, and actually do so."

The courts and the justice system could play a role, I add, through their understanding of justice, particularly intergenerational justice, and the young people's right to a secure future. "On the other hand, they are limited by the existing laws, a court just gave the green light for the Preemraff oil refinery in Sweden to be expanded, which will raise the country's CO2 emissions massively," says Isabelle. "In Switzerland, a court sided with the activists when they played tennis at CreditSuisse to draw attention to the financing of the fossil industry," Loukina counters. In America, a federal court has just ruled that the Dakota Access pipeline must stop operating, in a reaction to years of activism. And another US court has just declared that half of Oklahoma belongs to indigenous people, including the city of Tulsa with half a million inhabitants, in a landmark ruling (Healy/Liptak 2020). And the court cases brought by Greta and fourteen other children against Macron and Merkel are still underway. Denmark has established a new climate law, including mechanisms to keep it on course for the next ten years, regardless of changes in government. In Ireland, a court has ordered the government to develop a clearer and more effective climate policy – as in the Netherlands a few years earlier (Göbel 2019). "Ecocide" may maybe soon be recognised as a crime by the International Criminal Court.

With the climate strike and their daily campaigning, maybe the young activists are changing the zeitgeist, changing what is seen as reasonable, I think

to myself. To the point that carrying on in the same way can no longer be justified ethically, not by any government or any court. Like the women's movement a few decades ago. Really changing power relations. That is what they are achieving with their courage, these two, and with them millions of other children and young people, before our very eyes: worldwide, together with Vanessa and Hilda in Uganda, Howey Ou in China, Mitzi in the Philippines and Arshak in Moscow, with whom they are in constant contact, they are shifting all our standards.

All of them are prepared to go to the public with their strike and be met with punishments and sanctions. They are making a statement that it is no longer okay to destroy the rainforests in order to produce meat and palm oil; to build coal power stations; to run banks that maintain this system, so that power is concentrated with a few people and businesses. The people behind the fossil society, who are often rich white men, suddenly seem like grotesque creatures holding fast to the old ways. Maybe the young activists are mainly working on that: on making sure that one day, digging up coal, oil and gas and burning them will be seen as a criminal act, as ethically completely wrong; as will holding onto business models that concentrate power and do not serve everyone. A few brave people say: No. From now on, that's absurd. We are equal, free, one human race on one planet. It can't go on like this.

In these summer months in 2020, the permafrost in Siberia melts rapidly. Suddenly, it is 38 degrees in the north of Russia, and for weeks there is unbearable heat that has never been recorded before. Scientists talk about their nightmares caused by the release of methane from the thawing ground. And the destruction of the rainforest continues 50 percent more quickly in Brazil under the Bolsonaro regime in comparison with the previous year, while the villages of the indigenous population around Manaus are hit hard by the corona crisis (Phillips/Maisonnave 2020). At the same time, researchers point out that the likelihood of reaching tipping points such as the thawing of the permafrost is already increased by surpassing 1.5 degrees of global warming, and not only when two degrees are reached (Lenton et al. 2019).

New studies show that the glaciers in the Alps are melting by about one percent per year (Sommer et al. 2020). By the end of the century, they will almost all have disappeared forever, and with them part of our drinking water.

The German government decides in June to keep coal power stations up and running until 2038, for almost another twenty years, and promises to pay

operators such as RWE billions in compensation. The new coal power station "Datteln4" is added to the grid.

Kevin Anderson's (2020) study is published in June and shows that emissions would have to decrease by more than 12 percent every year from now on in European countries, for reasons of fairness. In its new CO2 law, the Swiss parliament instead aims for a decrease of about 25 percent within Swiss borders over the next ten years; this is less than a third of what the Paris Agreement would require.

The climate crisis increases the frequency and intensity of natural disasters worldwide. In Uganda, Hilda gets in touch when Victoria Lake floods. In China, flooding is so bad that millions of people lose their homes. Howey Ou, who is one of the bravest of the global band of rebels, writes a despairing tweet in the middle of July in the midst of the floods and raises the alarm. On the same day, Arshak is arrested in Moscow for participating in the climate strikes, and taken away by the police.

The Keeling curve in August shows that CO2 concentration in the air has reached 417 ppm, the highest level since about 3 million years ago, when sea levels were several metres higher. Despite this, during the corona crisis, the richest countries invest much more in the fossil economy than they do in renewable energy (Simon 2020).