

## **Chapter 4: COP25 in Madrid**

**October – December 2019: How can we end our fossil society in a fair way?**

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### **Changing direction**

It is a cool Friday in October. As usual, we are on strike in Mynttorget, when Andrea joins us. She often helps the young people and belongs to the core group among the intergenerational strike organisers. “Look at these videos from Chile,” she says; that is the country where many of her relatives live. Large parts of the population refuse to accept the enormous social disparities in the country any longer, and thousands are protesting in the streets of Santiago. They want to see political change, a democratisation of their society.

At the same time, after strike days with Indigenous people in North America and Canada, Greta and other activists are heading for that same city, Santiago – for the next COP meeting of all countries. The unrest in Chile is increasing every day. The government is intervening with increasing brutality, and goes on to cancel the COP summit. Madrid steps in. And the activists begin their journey back to Europe.

Many young activists from Europe travel to Spain. They want to develop the movement, because the official delegations are doing almost nothing: but without international cooperation, oil, coal, and gas will not stay in the ground, and the forests will not remain intact.

### **The global group comes together**

December has arrived. Outside in the streets of Madrid, the air is mild. In the huge halls of COP25 (Conference of the Parties), the governments of ev-

ery country are supposed to be finding political answers to the climate crisis with the help of their specialised delegations. It is exactly a year since Greta's speech in Katowice, a year since her meeting with Jonas, Marie-Claire, and Luisa; exactly ten years since the violent police measures against the protests at the COP15 summit in Copenhagen. But now the situation is different. It is no longer adult activists who are facing the police, but hundreds of children, young people and adults facing the politicians who are responsible. Something new is in the air.

"Where is the place for the strike?" some of the young people whisper to each other, among them a few from the Swedish group. They look around the anonymous trade fair hall in Madrid and then join around fifty other strike activists around their age, who are sitting on the floor in the foyer of the UN climate summit.

The movement has really become global, I think to myself as I sit between a pot plant and a security barrier. In front of me, for half an hour, not only the Europeans from the Smile meeting in the summer have been sitting silently, but also Hilda and Leah from Uganda, Fernando from Mexico and Canada, Xiye from New York, and Arshak from Russia, who will be imprisoned two weeks later for striking in Moscow – the young activists literally come from all continents and all corners of the planet. These are the faces which have become familiar to us from the Twitter feeds. Many of them have built up strike movements in their countries, including Hilda Nakabuye from Uganda, who makes an important and influential speech in Madrid (Nakabuye 2019). She has long been a supporter of FFF and one of the strongest voices of the African movement for the climate.

And now it is Friday, strike day. The delegates from all different countries have been walking past the activists for the last thirty minutes, often without looking at them, especially those who come from the countries playing a central role in the negotiations: Brazil in particular, with the Bolsonaro regime, Prime Minister Morrison's Australia, and the USA, still run by Trump. These three are constantly slowing things down at every juncture.

The conference focuses above all on one aspect, "Article 6" of the Agreement: an unclear exchange of emissions rights is supposed to be defined more clearly, so that richer countries would be able to buy their way out of their own emissions reductions by giving money to poorer countries. Unfortunately, the mechanism itself is not up for debate. What is being negotiated is only the question of whether both countries can then count this as a reduction – which would make it impossible to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement, because

suddenly there would be far too many emissions rights in circulation. As such – according to many representatives of big NGOs such as Greenpeace and Germanwatch – the summit cannot succeed. Only the worst-case scenario of “double counting” can be prevented.



In this sense, the global climate movement which has gathered here has to keep its own goals in mind. If there are people, younger and older, who want to take part in a global political “one people, one planet” project, then they’ll be here, I think to myself. We just have to find them in these huge halls.

Then there is a sudden commotion. Greta, who arrived this morning at nine with the night train from Lisbon, has seen the tweets and is planning to join the strike in the foyer. “Hey!” shouts the UN police officer and pushes a journalist back who has hit him over the head with his tripod in the melee. Immediately, hundreds of journalists arrive. The young activists slip under the barrier, join their peers and only avoid the horde of cameras with some difficulty. Somehow, some of them end up in a room which is more reminiscent of a presidential palace, with a thick carpet and expensive pictures on the walls. They are at the edge of the trade fair grounds, having passed through halls 1 to 10, past the individual countries’ pavilions and the big plenary hall in which the governments are holding their negotiations.

I am curious to know everything that has happened in the last months in America. But at the same time, I am worried about the group dynamic among the young activists, who are treated very differently by various NGO workers. These conferences, along with the attitude of NGOs from the Global North, al-

ways deepen the gulf between privileged activists and those who often build structures in the background without any recognition. And the mental health of all young people has to be the main concern, I say again and again to all the adults who are going about their business in the halls in Madrid.

Instead, the conversation soon focuses on the question: what is the plan for Madrid and the global climate conference? And once again, the problem becomes evident which was already obvious at the COP conference in Katowice the year before. Theoretically, the delegations could, in consultation with their governments, develop overarching solutions here (where and when else could such solutions come about?): a global master plan to stop the ecological, social and climate crisis. They could really change the rules, establish laws to reduce emissions by more than half across the world during this decade, as Hans Joachim Schellnhuber and other researchers have long been demanding, following the IPCC. Instead, it seems that these emissions are going to rise. Norway has just started operating the new, gigantic oil platform Johan Sverdrup, which will extract oil for decades. And Saudi Arabia is taking its oil business to the stock market. Aramcom immediately becomes the biggest company in the world, bigger than Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft.

The delegations in Madrid could agree to call an immediate halt to the building of fossil infrastructure, including the financing of such infrastructure by Swiss banks, for instance. And they could agree to build a global renewable energy system with help from richer nations (Jacobson et al. 2019; Teske et al. 2019), which would take power from the hands of a few companies and transfer it to the population. And maybe, I think to myself, maybe the populations of all countries, “the people”, would themselves support such global political change – if anybody asked them.

Then our phones ring in the Madrid conference centre. Isabelle and the other Stockholm activists are on the other end. Because on this same Friday, the fourth global strike is taking place in Stockholm, and now the other activists want to have Greta live on stage with them by phone – this time not in the elegant Kungsträdgården Park in the centre of the city, but in the suburb of Rinkeby. Climate justice is the theme, and the group has contacted people in the suburbs, which are so segregated in Stockholm; the rich white areas are separate from the poorer BIPOC areas. If we don't work together globally on a just basis, the sustainable transformation of society will not succeed, I think to myself, and look across at the hundred young people from around the world.

They, too, the young activists of Fridays for Future in the COP halls, are forging plans for the coming days and months. The world has to see that young

people are not going to play along anymore, and that they will not let the government delegations have the power to ignore their future. But how should they make that happen? A big event is planned for Wednesday, immediately after Greta's speech. Daily meetings are called. Official COP rooms are booked through the UN system. The activists soon find their way around in the hub-bub of the ten trade-fair halls, they know where the free coffee is, where they can charge their phones, and where they can get the latest information about the negotiations. They update each other at top speed via WhatsApp, and they hardly eat anything.

On Wednesday, Greta makes her speech in the big plenary hall, which is filled with hundreds of delegates and ministers. She has barely put down the microphone when the big event takes place. For the first time in the history of the COP, 100 young people storm the podium in the plenary hall and occupy it, before the very eyes of the delegations. I stand at the edge of the hall as they all suddenly stand up and dare to dive past the police, over the barriers, and onto the stage. A few of them begin very hesitantly to sing their climate justice song, and gradually more of them join the familiar tune. Through this, they make it clear that they will no longer accept what those in the hall are doing in their negotiations. They are literally taking a stand against these regimes which are threatening their future. And shortly afterwards, the UN police expel them from the congress centre, along with the rest of us – all those categorised as representatives of civil society.

The conference was supposed to be about mitigating climate change and the ecological crisis. Its decisions were meant to reduce emissions drastically and help poorer states, not only with the transition to renewable energies, but also with what is known as “loss and damage”, the destruction which is already now being caused by droughts and storms, bringing misery to thousands of people. None of that has happened. In the end, the leader of the Brazilian delegation even threatens to reject the feeble document and has to listen to a tirade from Tuvalu's delegation before he agrees at the last second. All the crunch issues are postponed to the following year's meeting in Glasgow.

Suddenly, we sense how huge the task is, and how omnipotent the fossil industry seems to be. And still, perhaps for the first time ever, the activists are united, carried and led by the young people and the indigenous people of this world. That unity comes from hours of discussions, joint actions, and an atmosphere of agreement which becomes ever more prevalent and links everyone together, even when there are still plenty of undecided strategic and organisational questions. Already in the lead-up to the summit in Copenhagen in 2009,

there were signs of greater unity; now, decades of fights between climate justice movements are put aside. This is not because they have found the lowest common denominator that they agree on, but because they have the greatest possible common ground.

The FFF activists stand by their analysis, together with the scientists of the IPCC: we do not need some abstract goals for “net” zero in 2045 or 2050, but real measures which guarantee immediate massive reductions worldwide, every year. And real global justice, concrete support for people. And the realisation becomes ever clearer: for that, we need “the people,” large parts of the world population.

### **The band of rebels doubles in size – the fossil fuel-treaty idea and the three pillars of political change**

But then so much changes for us. A new perspective opens up. If these governments don’t react to the crisis, what are our other possibilities? How can we translate our vision into a political reality? I continue to be convinced that for this we need a global political movement; not a movement of NGOs and not a party political movement, but a political movement in the broadest sense of the word. One which enough people from all populations can join, including in the interim periods when a global strike is not taking place; beyond marches and petitions. A movement which lives global democracy.

I look around the halls. And in the middle of these conversations, a plan starts to form on the horizon. These are individual people who don’t know each other well, from different continents, with different backgrounds: researchers, activists, lawyers and so on, who have significant social (and limited financial) resources. And they are all committed to the same idea. On the Sunday between the two conference weeks, a rainy, cold day, we sit in a dark theatre in the centre of Madrid, outside of the COP site. They are sitting in front of me: the grown-up global band of rebels. Some of them are dressed smartly. But they are a band of rebels nonetheless. They all come from different countries, just like the young people in the COP halls. Australians and Canadians, people from Nigeria, Sweden, and Ecuador. For this group, led by Tzeporah Berman from Canada, a core idea is that of a “treaty”, a global social contract organised from “below” on a fair international basis, which individuals, organisations, cities and countries can join, since global COP cooperation “from above” is barely bringing any results ([www.fossilfueltreaty.org](http://www.fossilfueltreaty.org)).

The UNEP Production Gap Report (2019) has just been published, and is shaping the conversations taking place in the breaks at the COP. It says that with the fossil infrastructure being built and currently planned up to 2030 (oil drilling towers, coal mines etc.), it is impossible to uphold the Paris Agreement. The world has already planned much more fossil fuel into its energy system. And because the absolute numbers are the important part here, this is not reversible: if these fossil fuels are extracted and burned, the temperature will rise by two, three, or four degrees.

But this means that the crucial strategic course is set: reducing emissions is not enough. That is key. And building new fossil-free infrastructure is not enough either. These two processes may be pillars of the change that needs to occur – in fact, they are the two central pillars. But another pillar must be added: preventing the building of infrastructure which has already been planned and contractually agreed, and immediately reducing existing fossil infrastructure – in a fair way. And for precisely this purpose, the group has developed an idea during the last year. What if global society agreed on a contract which would closely resemble the one which led to nuclear disarmament, the “Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”: a “Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty” (Newell & Simms 2019)? Nations, cities, and governments commit themselves to leaving coal, gas, and oil in the ground, first by placing a moratorium on the building of new fossil infrastructure globally, and secondly by reducing existing fossil infrastructure by at least 7 percent per year. And this should thirdly – and this has already been outlined by this group (Hällström 2021) – take place on a socially just basis, in terms of the situation within a country and between different countries; not only for workers in the fossil sectors, but for everyone who is affected by the transition.

What is needed now is pressure from the streets, so that cities and countries, at first just a few but then more and more, create and ratify this treaty, which defines all of this globally. But do we really need another treaty? We already have the Paris Agreement. And why should we once again rely on the governments of nation states, which have prioritised their short-term economic interests so many times? Already in 2017, I made a website to present (after describing the history of the COP15 in Copenhagen) the seemingly utopian idea of a conference to determine once and for all which stores of coal, oil and gas could be extracted in which locations, and which must stay in the ground. But at the time, I didn't know what kind of process could be used to make such a calculation and guarantee that it would be followed worldwide – apart from the fact that a global grassroots movement could make it happen.

The crux: we can ensure that no more coal, oil or gas is extracted than the Paris Agreement stipulates, if we radically protect forests at the same time and reshape agriculture along regenerative lines. This quantity can be calculated. This is the only way for us to have a small chance of handing over a liveable planet to future generations; that is the concept. Of course, there are big challenges on the way to such a new agreement across society. It has to be designed so that many people see it as fair and reasonable. For that, we need a list of all fossil projects worldwide which this group has to take on ([www.fossilfuelregistry.org](http://www.fossilfuelregistry.org)). But the gain would be enormous: we could all assume that the poison stays in the ground and that global warming is kept in check. At least the idea is on the table. And so that the idea is also in people's heads that extracting oil, gas and coal and maintaining coal power stations and oil fields is similar to pressing the red button of a nuclear weapon. They are toxic. Building them needs to be forbidden worldwide, and replaced by renewable energy, as well as by a different global political culture. This could complete FFF's focus on emissions budgets as the central idea of a global movement.



### **Components and processes of the fossil society - a system theory**

On this morning in the theatre in Madrid, we work together to try to understand the core of “fossil society”, to understand what it really consists of. What is it exactly, this system which began decades ago when the focus on fossil fu-

els was connected with the capitalist organisation of the economy? And what could replace it?

Who influences which processes so that they flourish or wither; who profits; which forms of domination and power are enabled? And where can we intervene and steer these processes in a democratic direction from which everyone will benefit (cf. Stilwell 2019)? Or on the level of values and ideas: how can we ensure that people no longer accept this fossil society, and the energy and finance industry behind it? That politicians who accept applications to seek new sources of fossil energy and exploit them are revealed to be irresponsible?

With the help of system theory (on system theory as an idea, see Göpel 2022), we trace the backbone of our fossil society, and distinguish components, on the one hand, from the processes which affect them. The components are the search for new fossil fuels, meaning the strange, dead, organic matter deep in the ground; then the mining or extraction of this matter; its transportation; its purification in refineries; its export and import, often from harbours; transport and storage; creating products (petrol, plastic...); the distribution of these products; their sale and finally their consumption. All of this leads to the production of greenhouse gases and to profit. Between these individual components, there are intensifying mechanisms and mechanisms holding things back: the more fuel is extracted, the bigger the transports; the more consumption, the greater the profit and the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

All these components are affected by processes: political processes such as approval for prospecting and exploitation and for the building of the infrastructure itself (the Nord Stream pipeline, for instance); legal processes; media processes (such as normalisation through the Murdoch press, or advertising for fossil products such as cars and flights); and economic processes such as private and public financing of these processes and investment and speculation in them; and finally, in turn, processes based on politics and values, which regulate these economic processes. And behind all of that, the overall view of what counts as valuable.

This means that the question of why banks and even public institutions such as universities, pension funds and central banks still invest their money in the fossil industry, several billions per year, is connected with the logic through which profit is made on the financial market (Vogl 2021).

At the time of our meeting, the Harvard Professor Naomi Oreskes publishes an article which continues the work of her book *Merchants of Doubt* (2012), on the sheer incomprehensibility of the lobbying work that maintains this fossil society with nothing but lies, financed by corporations such as Shell and

Exxon. What the biggest fossil corporations, supported by banks and politicians – in countries like Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden – are doing to the living situation of the children who are storming the stage in Madrid, will one day be seen as a crime against humanity; that is what comes out of our discussions.

Time passes much too quickly. The people gathered in the theatre agree above all to focus on a global “Non-Proliferation Treaty”: the global population has to be aware of what the UNEP Production Gap Report says. We must leave fossil fuels in the ground, worldwide.

We sketch out which processes can be stopped very quickly, and which other ones can be stopped in the longer term: banning the building and financing of new power stations, but also the search for new fossil energy sources and infrastructure, can be decided tomorrow at a global level. It will take a bit longer before we have an economy up and running which is no longer based on dominating other people and nature (Raworth 2018; Hickel 2020; Göpel 2022). That seems to be the only really sustainable way to live, especially for the ten billion humans on this planet. The idea of social relations also existing without domination must therefore be anchored in people’s minds and hearts in a transformed education system, I say to myself.

The people sitting in the room have close connections with the global grassroots movements that have already been fighting for decades for social and climate justice and for “keeping it in the ground”, especially in the Global South; they are connected with hundreds of similar movements, big and small – with their history of colonial exploitation and with today’s processes of renewal. They share networks with the leading university researchers, not only in climate research, but also in environmental systems, transformation studies, the new systemic approaches to economics, and so on: a band of rebels with potential.

The justice aspect is central to this. What is the use of young people or other movements striking for a ten percent reduction in emissions, say the members of this treaty group from Nigeria, when there is no energy at all in the region which could be reduced, but instead a need for basic infrastructure? I think back to Greta’s speeches. Already from the very beginning, she has emphasised this: that the whole strike idea and the transformation of societies only works if we don’t just take account of reductions in greenhouse gases, but also work “holistically” on building dignified living conditions for everyone, everywhere. That is the common project in my eyes; unconditionally guaranteeing everyone the resources we need to live.

At the same time as the Madrid conference, Mark Jacobson and his team at Stanford University publish a detailed paper, similar to the approach of Teske et al. (2019), showing how a global, renewable, fossil-free energy system could be created in the next twenty years: country by country for 150 countries, with information about the type of renewable energy and the energy network that would be needed for the distribution of electricity.

We can't just ban the fossil energy system, we say to ourselves, without building an alternative globally. If we combine these two basic ideas, we already get a long way: a global contract to ban and dismantle fossil infrastructure; paired with a global process of building a renewable energy system, financed on the basis of solidarity.

Only the third pillar is still missing: stopping emissions by establishing national, regional and individual budgets, which is what Fridays For Future have brought into the foreground, more clearly than any other movement, together with the idea of "fair shares", meaning that richer countries (with their historical accumulation of emissions and of exploitation) have to contribute financially to the transition in the poorer ones, to repairing "loss and damage", and even to debt relief.

If we combine all three pillars (global contract to stop and dismantle fossil infrastructure; alternative renewable energy system and "basic services," pushing through emissions budgets at a political level) and do so in a fair way by transforming the most important sectors (agriculture, transport, building and so on, supported by changes in the financial sector and the structure of the economy; see appendix), we would at least have a vague idea of how we can face the biggest challenge humanity has ever had to deal with. If it takes place in a socially just way. But that can only work, and this is something we all agree on in the Madrid theatre on this Sunday in December, if we can rely on something I call the non-domination principle, or: global, humane democratisation. How can a sustainable society emerge if we still allow discrimination or structures of domination, whether in relation to gender, ethnicity, or class (Fopp 2020/2)?

## Changing democracy

It is now Wednesday, and the two-week meeting is drawing to a close. Wearing her stripy green cardigan, Greta stands at the front on the stage in the huge, crowded plenary hall and makes a speech. While the first part was about warning people against letting themselves be lulled into a false sense of security by

net zero 2050 promises from the EU and other states, as well as corporations, she now reminds us that it is also dangerous to assume that democracy consists only of going to vote every four years. This image of ourselves as citizens is something we have to change, because change has to come now. We don't have four more years. Democracy is also something else. It is also public opinion and activism. That means us, every day. We can be loud and clear, through civil disobedience too, about demanding rules and laws which protect us and ensure that we are cared for.

From a systems theory perspective, I think as I stand in the audience, it is about finding the crucial lever, the "leverage point" for change (Göpel 2022). For me, this lever is about pointing out the logic of domination (meaning not just that we are burning nature down, but also that power is concentrated in a few hands) which is behind this fossil model of society. So it is about making the societal paradigm itself into a topic of conversation, and discussing why it is there. One aspect of this is to question the apparent separation of politics from the economy in late capitalism (see Fraser 2022). If democracy is only seen as a form, as the institutional organisation of political decisions, but is artificially separated from perspectives on the economic system (property structures, distribution of wealth, power and so on), everything becomes distorted. Violent, unsustainable relationships which are actually illegitimate when measured against the definition of democracy can be presented as the "will of the majority" and preserved on that basis. As soon as this problem becomes visible and comprehensible, not only does the legitimacy of fossil practices fall away, or so I hope – it can also become clear what is pushed out of the way in those circumstances, "substantial democracy": humane relations beyond domination, and care for one another and nature, which has always defined the foundations of the "economy", without really being valued (for an alternative, see the appendix).

## **The basic model for making grassroots democratic decisions**

In the halls, we climate justice activists from all countries and generations begin to talk about what might happen to the global climate movement and Fridays for Future next year. The winter/spring semester will be starting soon, and this time I'll be working at the institute at Stockholm University which specialises in education, youth studies and intergenerational living. And so, I think to myself in the middle of the COP halls in Madrid, this daily struggle

for non-dominant relationships obviously applies to our climate justice movements themselves. They, too, can become more democratic.



Far away, in foggy Zurich, Loukina is walking to her lectures at around this time, shortly before Christmas. She has begun studying environmental sciences; she could not free up the time and so she is missing from the big Swiss crowd in Madrid. The Swiss activists are also working on a democratisation project at the moment. The Swiss population is to be involved in a democratic process through citizens' assemblies or councils.

In Madrid, we begin to discuss different organisational models. Which is the best one? A democratic model that many of us adults in Madrid particularly value is based on small groups. For each of these groups ("affinity groups"), which work on a shared problem, there is a rule that first everyone has to have the same information about the issue, a similar level of knowledge. Everyone must then be able to express their worries, their fears and expectations. Only then does the brainstorming begin to decide possible solutions. These are then assessed with a temperature check; when people can see each other, it's still the best solution for them to put their hands in the air to show the extent to which they see a solution as good, bad or indifferent. A "facilitator" leads all these processes without intervening with their own opinion, and tries to guide them towards a consensus. A good rule is that someone only has a veto if they see a solution as being entirely inappropriate. A spokesperson is chosen who then represents the group's solution at a higher-level group which is formed

from the spokespeople of all the basis groups; this person has the mandate to seek a new solution with the other spokespeople if there is no consensus; this solution is then reported back and discussed in the original group. This process can be repeated at any number of levels, so that thousands of people can come to democratic decisions. A few additional mechanisms have to be introduced, but that is the basic grassroots model. And this would be a way for the local and national climate justice groups to come to decisions. A collective intelligence comes into play and is allowed to develop. This is the counter-model to the fossil society and its logic, I think, in which power, resources and influence are concentrated in only a few hands.



There are 500 000 of us, young people and older ones, when we walk through the streets of Madrid during the COP meeting on Friday evening; one of the biggest climate strikes of all time. FFF Madrid, with the help of Alejandro, who has long been in contact with Isabelle, Sophia, Ell, and the other Swedish activist, have achieved something huge in organisational terms. Children can be seen everywhere with cardboard placards: here, once again, there is no planet B. The almost unimaginable sea of people is led by the global strike activists who are so familiar to me by now. They are carrying a gigantic banner ("Climate Justice") and they dance their way along for three hours through the narrow streets. They are followed by half a million people. They say to themselves: enough is enough. We want change. We are rising up.