

On how we can fight the climate crisis: 'We have a once-in-century chance'

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In this extract from her latest book *On Fire*, the No Logo author looks at why capitalism and politics have got in the way of addressing the climate crisis.

On a Friday in mid-March, they streamed out of schools in little rivulets, burbling with excitement and defiance at an act of truancy. The little streams emptied on to grand avenues and boulevards, where they combined with other flows of chanting children and teens. Soon the rivulets were rushing rivers: 100,000 bodies in Milan, 40,000 in Paris, 150,000 in Montreal. Cardboard signs bobbed above the surf of humanity: THERE IS NO PLANET B! DON'T BURN OUR FUTURE. THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE!

There was no student strike in Mozambique; on 15 March the whole country was bracing for the impact of Cyclone Idai, one of the worst storms in Africa's history, which drove people to take refuge at the tops of trees as the waters rose and would eventually kill more than 1,000 people. And then, just six weeks later, while it was still clearing the rubble, Mozambique would be hit by Cyclone Kenneth, yet another record-breaking storm.

Wherever in the world they live, this generation has something in common: they are the first for whom climate disruption on a planetary scale is not a future threat, but a lived reality. Oceans are warming 40% faster than the United Nations predicted five years ago. And a sweeping study on the state of the Arctic, published in April 2019 in *Environmental Research Letters* and led by the renowned glaciologist Jason Box, found that ice in various forms is melting so rapidly that the "Arctic biophysical system is now clearly trending away from its 20th-century state and into an unprecedented state, with implications not only within but also beyond the Arctic." In May 2019, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services published a report about the startling loss of wildlife around the world, warning that a million species of animals and plants are at risk of extinction. "The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever," said the chair, Robert Watson. "We are eroding the very foundations of economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide. We have lost time. We must act now."

It has been more than three decades since governments and scientists started officially meeting to discuss the need to lower greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the dangers of climate breakdown. In the intervening years, we have heard countless appeals for action that involve "the children," "the grandchildren," and "generations to come". Yet global CO₂ emissions have risen by more than 40%, and they continue to rise. The planet has warmed by about 1C since we began burning coal on an industrial scale and average temperatures are on track to rise by as much as four times that amount before the century is up; the last time there was this much CO₂ in the atmosphere, humans didn't exist.

As for those children and grandchildren and generations to come who were invoked so

promiscuously? They are no longer mere rhetorical devices. They are now speaking (and screaming, and striking) for them selves. Unlike so many adults in positions of authority, they have not yet been trained to mask the unfathomable stakes of our moment in the language of bureaucracy and overcomplexity. They understand that they are fighting for the fundamental right to live full lives – lives in which they are not, as 13-year-old Alexandria Villaseñor puts it, “running from disasters”.

On that day in March 2019, organisers estimate there were nearly 2,100 youth climate strikes in 125 countries, with 1.6 million young people participating. That’s quite an achievement for a movement that began eight months earlier with a single teenager deciding to go on strike from school in Stockholm, Sweden: Greta Thunberg.

The wave of youth mobilisation that burst on to the scene in March 2019 is not just the result of one girl and her unique way of seeing the world, extraordinary though she is. Thunberg is quick to note that she was inspired by another group of teenagers who rose up against a different kind of failure to protect their futures: the students in Parkland, Florida, who led a national wave of class walkouts demanding tough controls on gun ownership after 17 people were murdered at their school in February 2018.

Nor is Thunberg the first person with tremendous moral clarity to yell “Fire!” in the face of the climate crisis. Such voices have emerged multiple times over the past several decades; indeed, it is something of a ritual at the annual UN summits on climate change. But perhaps because these earlier voices belonged to people from the Philippines, the Marshall Islands and South Sudan, those clarion calls were one-day stories, if that. Thunberg is also quick to point out that the climate strikes themselves were the work of thousands of diverse student leaders, their teachers and supporting organisations, many of whom had been raising the climate alarm for years.

For a decade and half, ever since reporting from New Orleans with water up to my waist after Hurricane Katrina, I have been trying to figure out what is interfering with humanity’s basic survival instinct – why so many of us aren’t acting as if our house is on fire when it so clearly is. I have written books, made films, delivered countless talks and co-founded an organisation (The Leap) devoted, in one way or another, to exploring this question and trying to help align our collective response to the scale of the climate crisis.

It was clear to me from the start that the dominant theories about how we had landed on this knife edge were entirely insufficient. We were failing to act, it was said, because politicians were trapped in short-term electoral cycles, or because climate change seemed too far off, or because stopping it was too expensive, or because the clean technologies weren’t there yet. There was some truth in all the explanations, but they were also becoming markedly less true over time. The crisis wasn’t far off; it was banging down our doors. The price of solar panels has plummeted and now rivals that of fossil fuels. Clean tech and renewables create far more jobs than coal, oil, and gas. As for the supposedly prohibitive costs, trillions have been marshalled for endless wars, bank bailouts and subsidies for fossil fuels, in the same years that coffers have been virtually empty for climate transition. There had to be more to it.

Which is why, over the years, I have set out to probe a different set of barriers – some economic, some ideological, but others related to the deep stories about the right of certain people to dominate land and the people living closest to it, stories that underpin contemporary western culture. And I have investigated the kinds of responses that might succeed in toppling those narratives, ideologies and economic interests, responses that weave seemingly disparate crises (economic, social, ecological and democratic) into a common story of civilisational transformation. Today, this sort of bold vision increasingly goes under the banner of a Green New Deal.

Because, as deep as our crisis runs, something equally deep is also shifting, and with a speed that startles me. Social movements rising up to declare, from below, a people's emergency. In addition to the wildfire of student strikes, we have seen the rise of Extinction Rebellion, which kicked off a wave of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, including a mass shutdown of large parts of central London. Within days of its most dramatic actions in April 2019, Wales and Scotland both declared a state of "climate emergency," and the British parliament, under pressure from opposition parties, quickly followed suit.

Humanity has a once-in-a-century chance to fix an economic model that is failing the majority of people on multiple fronts

In the US, we have seen the meteoric rise of the Sunrise Movement, which burst on to the political stage when it occupied the office of Nancy Pelosi, the most powerful Democrat in Washington, DC, one week after her party had won back the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterm elections. They called on Congress to immediately adopt a rapid decarbonisation framework, one as ambitious in speed and scope as Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal, the sweeping package of policies designed to battle the poverty of the Great Depression and the ecological collapse of the Dust Bowl.

The idea behind the Green New Deal is a simple one: in the process of transforming the infrastructure of our societies at the speed and scale that scientists have called for, humanity has a once-in-a-century chance to fix an economic model that is failing the majority of people on multiple fronts. Because the factors that are destroying our planet are also destroying people's lives in many other ways, from wage stagnation to gaping inequalities to crumbling services to surging white supremacy to the collapse of our information ecology. Challenging underlying forces is an opportunity to solve several interlocking crises at once.

In tackling the climate crisis, we can create hundreds of millions of goods jobs around the world, invest in the most systematically excluded communities and nations, guarantee healthcare and childcare, and much more. The result of these transformations would be economies built both to protect and to regenerate the planet's life support systems and to respect and sustain the people who depend on them.

This vision is not new; its origins can be traced to social movements in ecologically ravaged parts of Ecuador and Nigeria, as well as to highly polluted communities of colour in the United States. What is new is that there is now a bloc of politicians in the US, Europe, and elsewhere, some just a decade older than the young climate activists in the streets, ready to translate the urgency of the climate crisis into policy, and to connect the dots among the multiple crises of our times. Most prominent among this new political breed is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who, at 29, became the youngest woman ever elected to the US Congress. Introducing a Green New Deal was part of the platform she ran on. Today, with the race to lead the Democratic party in full swing, a majority of leading presidential hopefuls claim to support it, including Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris and Cory Booker. It had been endorsed, meanwhile, by 105 members of the House and Senate.

The idea is spreading around the world, with the political coalition European Spring launching a green new deal for Europe in January 2019 and a broad green new deal coalition of organisations in Canada coming together (the leader of the New Democratic party has adopted the frame, if not its full ambition, as one of his policy planks). The same is true in the UK, where the Labour party is in the middle of negotiations over whether to adopt a green new deal-style platform.

Those of us who advocate for this kind of transformative platform are sometimes accused of using it to advance a socialist or anticapitalist agenda that predates our focus on the climate crisis. My response is a simple one. For my entire adult life, I have been involved in movements confronting the

myriad ways that our current economic systems grinds up people's lives and landscapes in the ruthless pursuit of profit. No Logo, published 20 years ago, documented the human and ecological costs of corporate globalisation, from the sweatshops of Indonesia to the oil fields of the Niger Delta. I have seen teenage girls treated like machines to make our machines, and mountains and forests turned to trash heaps to get at the oil, coal and metals beneath.

The painful, even lethal, impacts of these practices were impossible to deny; it was simply argued that they were the necessary costs of a system that was creating so much wealth that the benefits would eventually trickle down to improve the lives of nearly everyone on the planet. What has happened instead is that the indifference to life that was expressed in the exploitation of individual workers on factory floors and in the decimation of individual mountains and rivers has instead trickled up to swallow our entire planet, turning fertile lands into salt flats, beautiful islands into rubble, and draining once vibrant reefs of their life and colour.

I freely admit that I do not see the climate crisis as separable from the more localised market-generated crises that I have documented over the years; what is different is the scale and scope of the tragedy, with humanity's one and only home now hanging in the balance. I have always had a tremendous sense of urgency about the need to shift to a dramatically more humane economic model. But there is a different quality to that urgency now because it just so happens that we are all alive at the last possible moment when changing course can mean saving lives on a truly unimaginable scale.

Naomi Klein

- *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* is published Allen Lane (£20). To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.

- *Naomi Klein will be in conversation with Katharine Viner at a Guardian Live event on 15 October.*

P.S.

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- As the crisis escalates...

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