



Students protest against climate change in Montevideo, Uruguay, in April 2019. Credit: Inés M. Pousadela

PART 1

STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT 2020

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION ON CLIMATE CRISIS

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The Amazon burned, and at the year's end, Australia burned too. Venice flooded and locusts raged across Kenya. In every corner of the world the reality of climate crisis was there for all to see. Not to see it was a political choice, a willful denial of reality. But to see the crisis and then fail to act on it adequately was still mainstream politics. It was civil society that called out the reality of the crisis and urged action. 2019 was the year that climate change was pushed into the headlines and became part of everyday conversation, and it happened because of civil society action. Civil society's classical role of speaking truth to power had never been so vital.



Greta Thunberg sets sail in a carbon-neutral yacht from Plymouth, UK, in August 2019, to attend a climate change conference in New York.

Credit: Finnbarr Webster/Getty Images

SCHOOL STRIKE MOVEMENT RISES: STORIES FROM BANGLADESH, COLOMBIA, FIJI, GHANA, THE PHILIPPINES AND RUSSIA

As governments failed and international processes underdelivered, it was direct action that pushed the needle on climate justice. Swedish teenage activist **Greta Thunberg** sparked and became a symbol of a mobilisation of conscience that spanned the world. The lone school strike she started in August 2018 burgeoned into a global movement, demanding responsible and accountable policies to avoid climate catastrophe and urging policymakers to **listen to the scientists** who have systematically produced evidence of the climate crisis. In a reversal of stereotypical roles, it was young people who offered the voice of reason and showed their elders what it means to act responsibly.

Beyond the coverage of Greta Thunberg, there were many other **young activists** of all backgrounds and from all over the world who took up the reins and became climate leaders. The call to action found a receptive audience among the young people who will live with the full consequences of climate change. What started as a lone act evolved during 2019 into **Fridays for the Future**, an international youth-led movement holding weekly climate strikes. The movement became massive, turning climate justice into the rallying cry of a generation.

The movement mushroomed in 2019. By March, students had mobilised in 125 countries **around the world** including, to name but few, **Australia, Canada, India, Kenya, Slovenia, South Africa, Uganda, the UK and the USA**, as well as those detailed below. Protesters pointed the finger at **politicians** for failing to act, but also called out the media for not paying enough attention to the climate emergency. When threatened with punishment for missing school, students responded that they valued education and were walking out reluctantly, but they simply had to act because their futures were on the line.

What was crucial about the movement was how quickly young people in the global south took the initiative, shaking off attempts by climate deniers

to characterise the movement as something led by privileged people in the global north, and how quickly they connected with the struggles of decades-old global south environmental movements. In different local contexts the school strike approach was adopted and adapted, often connecting to ongoing civil society engagement.

The Pacific islands are on the frontline of climate change, and the school strike movement and its message of global solidarity resonated across the oceans, as **Maria Nailevu**, a feminist climate activist from Fiji, relates:¹

Greta Thunberg is a great example of the younger generation having enough and speaking up to our failing system. Look at her now: she not only has the attention of our leaders, but also got international attention. The beauty behind this revolution is that it all started with Greta taking a day off school in 2018 to go sit outside the Swedish parliament to call for strong action on global warming.

There is a unique and powerful aspect of this climate strike, perhaps because it evolved from Greta Thunberg, who I find special because of her diverse identities: she is a young girl with autism and she is from a global north country but stood up and spoke out not only for herself but for millions of people, including us in Fiji and the Pacific, who are angry at our failing system and structures and scared of our uncertain future because of leaders who are prioritising thriving economies at the expense of community livelihoods and our environment.

I find the climate strike really impactful and strong. I think it's a sign that people are now aware of the realities of climate impacts; they now understand the facts and the science that are shared by climate scientists on the status of the planet and our entire ecosystems. People cannot stand by and watch our planet be destroyed and our entire human race wiped out.

I hope the United Nations (UN) sees the seriousness in the key messages shared through the climate strikes and also strongly recognises that

¹All interviews quoted in this report are edited extracts. Full versions of interviews can be found on our website at <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-center/news/interviews>.

we are now in a time of climate crisis, as we can see in the various disasters striking across the globe. This requires a radical shift if we truly want to save humankind, our planet and all living species.

Sharif Jamil of **Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA)**, a platform that organises civil society movements against environmental degradation, relates how the school strike call was picked up in Bangladesh and Nepal, plugging into and amplifying existing campaigning:

*In September, we mobilised in the context of the Global Climate Strike. Waterkeepers Bangladesh, Waterkeepers Nepal, the Nepal River Conservation Trust and BAPA jointly organised a series of events and activities in solidarity, including a **mobilisation** to protect the Himalayas by the banks of the Sunkoshi River in Nepal, near the source of the Brahmaputra and Ganges rivers, on 23 September, and another focused on **protecting** the Sundarbans, a mangrove area in the delta formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers in the Bay of Bengal, held at Katka Beach on 29 September.*

Perk Pomeyie of the **Ghana Youth Environmental Movement** outlines how the school strike call was taken up in Ghana, making the most of the available resources and skills:

I championed the first #FridaysforFuture and #SchoolClimateStrike campaigns in the northern region of Ghana. I organised and coordinated strikes in Damongo and Tamale. I designed creative graphics and campaign materials, which attracted more than 200 schoolchildren and young people to these global campaigns. This was important because it was the first time that children and young people in that part of Ghana came out in large numbers to raise their voice on the impacts of climate change and demand urgent action from their leaders. Northern Ghana is currently experiencing the worst impact of climate change in the form of droughts and food insecurity.

*Ours was one of the **many** #FridaysforFuture events that were held in Ghana. I think we've been successful in mobilising because we've used innovative approaches. Personally, I've used my skills in design thinking and graphic design and my expertise in non-violent communication and direct action. I communicate to reach my target on various social media platforms, while also mobilising communities for action on the ground with context-relevant messages to address specific environmental challenges.*

In Colombia, the build-up to strike action provided an important rallying point for regional networking and the sharing of learning, as a **young climate activist** who asked to stay anonymous for security reasons relates:

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PERK POMEYIE, GHANA





Young protesters stage a 'die-in' during the Global Climate Strike in Colombia.
Credit: FridaysforFuture Colombia

We went to a Latin American meeting of Fridays for Future that was held in Chile with the support of 350.org. It was a meeting of climate advocates to build a Latin American network and take the movement to the regional level. It helped us a lot to meet other young people from other parts of the region who were also mobilising, to discover that we could get together and feel that we had international support to do our job. It gave us some hope.

Right after that meeting, we began to try to form a national environmental network, travelling to as many territories as possible and enlisting young people from other Colombian regions. There is still a lot to be done, but we are growing exponentially because when a new group joins in, they reach out to three or four other groups. Throughout 2019 we focused on this process, touring territories, communicating our message to people and creating links.

As the interviewee goes on to describe, the mass protests that erupted across Colombia from November (see section) also provided an opportunity for climate activists to encourage people protesting to include climate

action among their protest demands:

*In a country where people are afraid to speak, on 21 November millions of people took to the streets. It was one of the largest mobilisations Colombia has witnessed over the past 40 years. This was a unique opportunity. Within the framework of these protests, the environmental movement also **put forward** its proposals and demands. We may not be able to mobilise people specifically around climate, but we can take advantage of these mass mobilisations and put our issues out there. If there are people willing to mobilise, we can approach them, tell them what is happening to the environment and communicate our demands so that they understand that our issues also concern them and they start mobilising for them as well.*

*By doing this, we succeeded in getting the national strike committee to include the **declaration** of a climate emergency in Colombia among its demands. This was a very big breakthrough.*

For **Jhewoung Capatoy** of **Young Bataeños Environmental Advocacy Network** in the Philippines, the climate strikes were an opportunity to assert the value of mobilising locally and to call attention to the need for action in the global south:

Our youth organisation participated in the Global Climate Strike in September by holding a local event. There also was a mobilisation in the capital, Manila, but we decided to protest locally, staying in the place where coal-fired power plants are having their worse effects. The reason why we mobilised is that we want to hold these corporations, as well as the government that lets them have their way, responsible for what they are doing to our communities.

We had been mobilising and protesting since before the global strike, but the Global Climate Strike was a good opportunity to put our issues out there. It was very useful as a framework because it was a global call to make corporations responsible for emissions. We chose to participate in this global call from our own local communities, without going to demonstrate in Manila, in order to communicate that the

reason why we are fighting is that the people in these communities are suffering the worst effects of global warming and the climate crisis. It is the rich of the global north who profit from these big corporations that emit carbon gases, but it is always us, the poor communities of developing countries, who suffer the worst environmental impacts of these industries.

True, people in developed countries are striking and mobilising, and it is good that they have called attention to what is happening, but let's always remember that the impacts of the climate crisis are extremely unequal. The impacts that people in the global north are facing are not as devastating as the ones we are suffering in the Philippines. That's the reason why we are mobilising: because it is us who are experiencing the consequences of their actions. It is not even a matter of choice really. We are a poor country in which people are dying due to the climate crisis, so we are fighting for our lives.

Another of the many millions of young people inspired to act was Russian climate activist **Arshak Makichyan**, who started a weekly climate strike in the capital, Moscow, in March, in turn inspiring students in other Russian cities to take action. He relates what first prompted his action and how he began his activism journey:

It is strange that I learned about the climate crisis from Greta Thunberg. I am grateful to her for that. It is better to know the truth and fight than to live in ignorance. It was not inspiration. It was hopelessness that made me take action. It was a difficult decision, but I knew I had nothing to lose.

The first weeks I was very afraid and felt a little silly, as people couldn't understand what I was doing. I had no support in Russia, but people around the world on Twitter were supporting me and that was something. I chose to stand in Pushkin Square, because a week before I'd seen other strikes there, with demands to stop the war with Ukraine, and I thought that it's more possible to influence people in Russia than it is to influence the government. And on top of that, Pushkin is a symbol of freedom in Russia.



Filipino activists prepare banners for their anti-coal campaign.

Credit: Young Bataños Environmental Advocacy Network @Facebook

But protesting is never easy in Russia's repressed civic space, where the government seeks to stifle any views that challenge presidential power. President Vladimir Putin has publicly **doubted** that climate change is human-made and his government has **published** a climate plan that talks about harnessing the 'positive' impacts of climate change in Russia. Arshak therefore faced difficulty and hostility, but was not deterred:

On my strikes I get many different kinds of reactions from people. Some express their support and take pictures, but some accuse me of being a spy from the USA or some other country. After one of my first interviews, police came and asked how much I was being paid. A few weeks ago, a person threatened to stab me if I didn't put down my poster and then stayed around, calmly waiting, even after I called the police. And the police couldn't, or rather wouldn't, arrest him, even though I have a video. But even so, something good came out of that: it was a reason for independent Russian media to write about Fridays for Future.

Organising mass strikes is also very difficult. Usually the government refuses to authorise them without even providing a reason or only allows you to strike in places where not so many people can see your protest. They refused my two applications in July, then I wrote again saying that if they refused the next one we would do single strikes every day, so they called me and offered a place that was not so bad, even though it was not the place that we wanted.

Russian students were also not permitted to hold a mass strike as part of the Global Climate Strike in September; people could only undertake solo protests.

It was not only in Russia where young people faced hostility for taking part in climate strikes. Greta Thunberg was relentlessly attacked on social and traditional media and by political leaders, who variously questioned her mental health and accused her of being manipulated or brainwashed. The spectacle in general was one of young people, many of them young women, trying to make a difference to their world but being rebuked and ridiculed by older, powerful men, and it was not edifying.

Climate strikers outside UN headquarters in New York were repeatedly **questioned** by the police, and in many cases the authorities and establishment politicians **condemned** young people for taking part in school walk-outs. Climate protesters were often told that they should concentrate on their education. Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison was typical when he **called for** 'less activism' in schools; the inference was that young people should leave the decision-making to the grown-ups.

There were more positive responses: in Slovenia, the environment ministry and teachers' union **supported** the protests and the prime minister met with representatives of the Youth for Climate Justice Movement. Italy's education minister, part of the new government that took office in September, ([see section](#)) also **described** climate strikes as 'essential' and urged schools to let their students take part in them.

Social media offered a mixed blessing. It played a huge role in inspiring people to act, mobilising support and building international solidarity, but it also enabled trolling, disinformation and hate speech on a vast scale. Arshak relates these challenges in his context:

An anonymous Telegram channel recently shared the data of 3,000 people, including mine, and I had a very uncomfortable feeling. I felt there was less security and greater danger. But I'm not afraid of them and I'm going to continue and strike to the end with my new friends in Russia and around the world.

There are a lot of strange and dirty things online, such as trolls, false information and propaganda.

“THERE IS MORE AND MORE RESPONSIBILITY AND THERE IS NO WAY BACK FOR US. THE WORLD NOW KNOWS THAT IN RUSSIA WE ARE FIGHTING, SO THAT THEY HAVE HOPE. WE INCREASE THE POWER OF PROTESTS BY TAKING RISKS.”

ARSHAK MAKICHYAN, RUSSIA



But it's not so bad, because the internet also helps us. Support and communication on the internet have been very important to us.

It's easier when you know that you have millions of people behind you. The first weeks were the most difficult, because I did not have such support and felt a little silly by myself. Now I have that support, even in Russia, but it is also a very big responsibility. There is more and more responsibility and there is no way back for us. The world now knows that in Russia we are fighting, so that they have hope. We increase the power of protests by taking risks. And we will continue to do so, because there is no security without a future.

Many shared such motivations. In August, hundreds of young people, some of them protesting for the first time, **joined** Greta Thunberg outside the UN headquarters in New York, after she had crossed the Atlantic by sea to draw attention to the climate impact of aviation. Among them was Alexandria Villaseñor, who inspired by Greta's actions, had protested every

Friday outside the UN since December 2018. By September, millions of people had joined protests around the world, and the Global Climate Strike was the largest climate protest ever. In one day, a staggering **two million people** of all ages walked out of schools, universities and workplaces in an estimated **185 countries** on every inhabited continent, and six million people took part in a protest over the course of the week. Over a million people were reported to have taken part in protests in Italy alone. Trade unions mobilised in support as adults heeded the call of young people to join them in making their voices heard ahead of the UN Climate Action Summit (see below). In New York the authorities backed the protest, giving students permission to take part in the strike.

After delivering a **powerful speech** at the UN, Greta Thunberg **rallied** with several thousand young people in Denver, Colorado, where she once again made clear that if those in power weren't willing to act, young people will. The momentum is sure to continue. Young people around the world will continue to strike in their own locales and in a range of ways to demand climate justice.

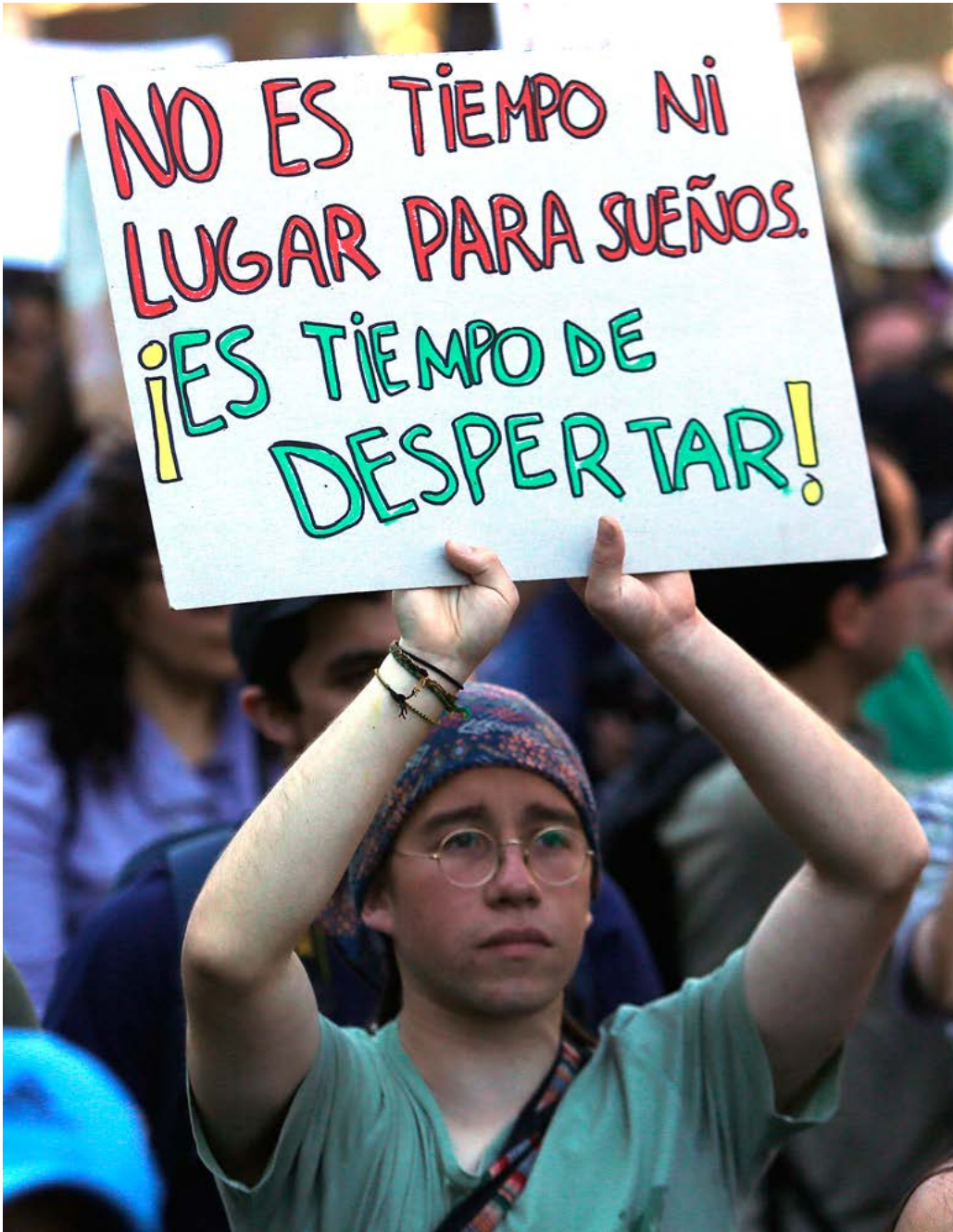


Arshak Makichyan goes on his 53rd week of strike and documents it on Twitter in March 2020. Credit: Arshak Makichyan @Twitter

GRASSROOTS ACTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE RESPONSES IN BOLIVIA, FIJI, GHANA AND SUDAN

School strikes commanded the headlines, but they often plugged into and complemented other forms of ongoing, local and under-acknowledged climate and environmental activism. Around the world, environmental, land and Indigenous rights defenders have long mobilised in resistance against activities with climate, environmental and human rights impacts – including extractive industries and agribusiness – and have often experienced violent and lethal repression for their activism. The burgeoning of local-level climate activism gave fresh impetus to these continuing struggles.

Sudan is one country that is experiencing the impacts of climate change, but where school striking may not be the most appropriate action to take. There, young people are offering other responses. **Nisreen Al Sayeem** – of the Sudan Youth Organization on Climate Change and Youth and



A demonstrator holds a sign that reads 'It's not the time or place to dream... it's the time to wake up' during the climate strike in Santiago, Chile. Credit: Marcelo Hernandez/Getty Images

Environment – Sudan, a junior negotiator at UN Climate Talks for the African Group of Negotiators and a co-organiser of the UN Youth Climate Summit – outlines the real and visible impacts of climate change in Sudan:

In Sudan, livelihoods depend on natural resources, and because of climate change seasons are mixed now. Autumn is late, winter is early and summer is early. Now we have a lot of conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over land, resources and crops. We have had very unfortunate events in the east of Sudan where two tribes, one of farmers and one of pastoralists, fought between each other. In 20 days we lost about 180 people in this conflict.

Desertification is killing their land, so they are not able to do any agriculture activities or even pasture their cattle and you know how frustrated you are as a parent if you have kids at home and you cannot bring food to the table. In some villages you find animals and people drinking from the same sources. More and more people are moving to the capital and leaving rural areas deserted. Things are very complicated: climate change is no joke or a way to push the government to do something; even the government is affected by climate change in a country like Sudan.

In response, as Nisreen describes, young people are forging their own forms of action, including by tapping into local traditions:

Although it is a very progressive thing to hold strikes in global north countries, in a country like Sudan, going to school is a privilege for a lot of students, and it doesn't make any sense for people to strike from a school they got into after a huge struggle. So I haven't been focusing much on the strikes. But I really think it's affecting the global north countries and I think it's impressive. For us we have other different ways of taking action.

Young people in Sudan are taking three different paths for climate action: policy, activism – including advocacy, campaigning and work in civil society organisations (CSOs) – and community-based work. Community-based work is what the majority of young people in Sudan are doing, because they realise that policymakers are not quick enough and civil society work is not inclusive enough, so they are doing the government’s job in many places and also doing the humanitarian’s job in other places.

*There is an initiative called **Nafeer**, which has been a tradition in Sudan since forever. When there is a problem, people join together and try to solve it. Because of climate change, we started witnessing severe rainfall. This caused floods, which completely destroyed more than 18 villages, killed 68 people and left more than 184,000 people homeless. So young people decided to take action. They started delivering humanitarian aid, helping people who were hurt and providing food, shelter and medicines, because the water was contaminated and there was a diarrhoea outbreak.*

Young people also wanted to show solidarity, sharing their sadness and their tears with the people from the flooded villages, and showing them that they were not alone. Even if most of the people who participated in the initiative were not really affected by the floods, the youth of Sudan are still the same, brothers and sisters, and whatever happened to you also happened to me, and with this concept and this spirit, we did it after three months of flooding and tears.

Local-level work to encourage the adoption of alternatives to help the climate, again with young people to the fore, is also a focus in Bolivia, as **Rodrigo Meruvia** of the **Gaia Pacha Foundation** relates:

We work with the aim of increasing the resilience of rural communities in the face of climate change, as well as building awareness among the urban population regarding the ways in which their consumption patterns affect the development prospects of many communities in rural areas. First of all, we work to show how climate change impacts on areas of small family subsistence production and create



Bolivian girls campaign against fossil fuels in their community during the Global Climate Strike. Credit: Fundación Gaia Pacha @Facebook

mechanisms to help increase their resilience to climate change. We also work to empower young people both in rural communities and cities. We train them in technical issues as well as in matters of strategy and leadership, so that they can produce initiatives and generate alternatives on topics such as deforestation or greenhouse gas emission. We encourage them to generate projects applicable to their immediate surroundings and we foster networks and bridges with other civil society and academic organisations to support the implementation of their initiatives.

For example, at the moment we are working with universities in Cochabamba on the subject of alternative transportation, with the aim of establishing bike paths between the various university campuses within the city, so that young people can use bicycles as an emission-free and safe means of transportation. With that aim in mind, mobile phone apps are being developed that will indicate the safest routes, and parking lots for bicycles are being established, among other things. Work is also being done to educate car drivers, in partnership with the university and in a joint initiative with the



As part of an awareness-raising campaign, activist Perk Pomeyie speaks to high school students about the need to plant trees. Credit: Perk Pomeyie

municipality and some private companies that are interested in this issue.

Perk Pomeyie outlines the range of responses in Ghana that have come alongside the school strikes:

I work with diverse communities in different locations depending on the environmental challenge being addressed. Some of these include low-income groups who reside in informal settlements and are disproportionately affected by the impacts of plastic pollution and flooding. Another group I work with are frontline communities who face the impacts of climate change, such as drought, water stress and food insecurity. I also work in high schools and university campuses with student volunteers, aged between 12 and 25, who are passionate about the environment and require training and capacity to take action. Finally, I engage with CSOs working on various Sustainable Development Goals nationwide. Most of these are youth groups with leaders and members between 18 and 35 years old, working on initiatives and projects in areas such as conservation, plastic recycling,

water, sanitation and hygiene and climate mitigation and adaptation.

Several of these responses seek to reach and help people who are experiencing increased vulnerability as a result of climate change. Climate change impacts disproportionately on those groups that are already most vulnerable and have the least power, including the poorest people and most socially excluded groups. Supporting vulnerable groups is a necessary response, but one often overlooked by government policymakers. As Maria Nailevu describes in relation to the Pacific, processes to address climate change too often leave out excluded voices, conspiring to perpetuate exclusion and exacerbate vulnerability:

There is still a lot of work needed in terms of inclusiveness within our national and regional climate responses. There are still many key consultation processes that continue to exclude diverse voices that matter – those of women, LGBTQI+ people, people with disabilities, sex workers, people from rural and remote communities and young people, among others. Also, disaster responses still need to be more inclusive to ensure that all people, regardless of their race, sexuality, or background, have fair access to disaster assistance.

After Cyclone Winston in 2016, one of the gaps identified within our disaster risk reduction work was that many marginalised communities were left out from accessing government assistance because it was designed only for traditional family structures. Only men as heads of households received the assistance on behalf of their families, which excluded many people who were already living on or below the poverty line and left them on their own to recover at their own cost.

Additionally, evacuation centres are not safe for women, girls and LGBTQI+ people. There were reports of many human rights violations that arose during the evacuation period. We have also documented cases of LGBTQI+ people who were willing to risk their lives in temporary shelters because of fear of violence and discrimination at evacuation centres.

Civil society is working to develop spaces in which people can challenge

their exclusion and draw from their own resources to be part of the response to the climate crisis. As Maria relates, young people are finding their own participation pathways:

Having the voice of young people heard has been a continuous challenge. However, in my feminist and climate justice work I feel that there are now spaces slowly opening up for young people and other marginalised voices. This has happened as a result of the continuous push by the feminist movement, and especially by DIVA for Equality, which has been doing great work in connecting direct voices that matter with key spaces.

One of the ways in which DIVA addresses inclusive responses is by creating inclusive and safe spaces for all people. Every year, DIVA hosts national conventions for LBT women, feminist bootcamps and an event called the Fiji Women Defending Commons, which convenes rural, maritime and urban poor women who are already doing work on climate, gender and sustainable development.

These key spaces that DIVA creates bring in excluded communities to come together to learn, share, strategise and work towards building a stronger social movement that connects communities that are doing great work with little support, contributing towards the resilience of their communities. These convenings produce useful outcomes, including outcome documents and demands that are co-produced by participants and shared with all relevant stakeholders, including the government, so they hear directly from people and can act on it. DIVA is modelling great work that I hope others, and especially our national and regional bodies, can follow to ensure that all people are included in climate responses if they truly believe in the 'leave no one behind' statement.

I also personally feel that if youth spaces are shrinking, young people have the potential to shift that around by being radical and starting to implement actions rather than staying frustrated at decision-makers and our failing system. Young people can easily organise and act through community activities – such as planting trees, doing clean-up campaigns and conducting awareness drives – so that true work and commitment become visible, which can capture the attention of our leaders and reflect on existing processes.

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MARIA NAILEVU, FIJI



EXTINCTION REBELLION TAKES DIRECT ACTION

A NEW MOVEMENT RISES IN THE UK, USA AND AROUND THE WORLD

While the school strike movement was spreading around the world and people were taking diverse forms of local action in country after country, another activist response that would travel widely was being pioneered in the UK. A non-partisan, direct-action civil disobedience movement, Extinction Rebellion (XR) was founded in late October 2018, and by the end of that year its devolved, voluntary model had been adopted in **35 countries**; in 2019 it spread further, and there were reported to be 360 groups in 69 countries, several in the global south.

XR urges governments to tell the truth about the climate crisis and therefore declare a state of climate emergency, achieve zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2025 and hold citizens' assemblies to formulate policy to address the crisis. XR is inspired by and adapts the non-violent civil disobedience tactics honed by the US civil rights movement, while sharing with the school strike movement the idea of using mass mobilisation and attention-grabbing actions to make headlines, influence public discourse and bring moral pressure to bear on politicians. XR actions often involve



Extinction Rebellion environmental activists hold a spontaneous funeral procession march as the London Metropolitan Police attempts to clear three occupied sites in April 2019. Credit: Ollie Millington/Getty Images

peacefully disobeying laws and police orders. Disruption of everyday life is a key tactic: it attracts attention and conveys the message that there can be no business as usual in the face of climate crisis; the temporary disruption caused by direct action will be little compared to the impacts of climate catastrophe. The size of the crisis demands a new response, and at scale.

UK protests concentrated around two mass actions, in April and in October. In April, XR held a mass disruption in the heart of London, occupying and closing down key streets and a central bridge over the River Thames for several days. Protesters installed a boat in Oxford Circus, heart of the city's shopping district, to draw attention to sea-level rise, and brought plants and trees to the bridge, symbolically rewilding it. Performance and art were a big part of the protests.

A further wave of protests in October, under the banner of 'International Rebellion', also shut down key parts of London. Activists dressed in mourning **sprayed fake blood** onto the British Treasury building, highlighting the UK government's continuing support for fossil fuel projects, and others disrupted public transport services, including **London City Airport**. A space outside parliament was filled with potted trees and politicians were encouraged to **collect** them to show their support for reforestation. Up to 30,000 people were said to have taken part in the disruption, and in both April and October protests also took place at other locations around the UK.

The fossil fuel industry was one obvious target of the protests. In February, for example, XR activists glued themselves to the windows of a London hotel where an **oil conference** was being held. But the responsibility for the climate crisis goes further than the extractive giants. In September, XR activists **glued** themselves to the pavement outside two banks in the city of Manchester, to denounce the financial sector's continuing fossil fuel investments, targeting Barclays, which had invested around US\$20 billion in fossil fuel companies over the past year, and HSBC.

The fossil fuel industry's sponsorship of cultural institutions was also targeted; in October a **performance art** protest was staged at London's National Portrait Gallery, an institution sponsored by oil giant BP. A further strand of protest **targeted** Google for **giving funds** to US-based conservative

think tanks that deny climate change, and for hosting videos of climate change deniers on YouTube and **pushing** these as recommendations. YouTube is a platform particularly **watched** by young people and Google profits from advertising when climate denial videos go viral. Other activists from the associated Animal Rebellion group attempted to block access to London's main **fish market** to call for a sustainable food production system.

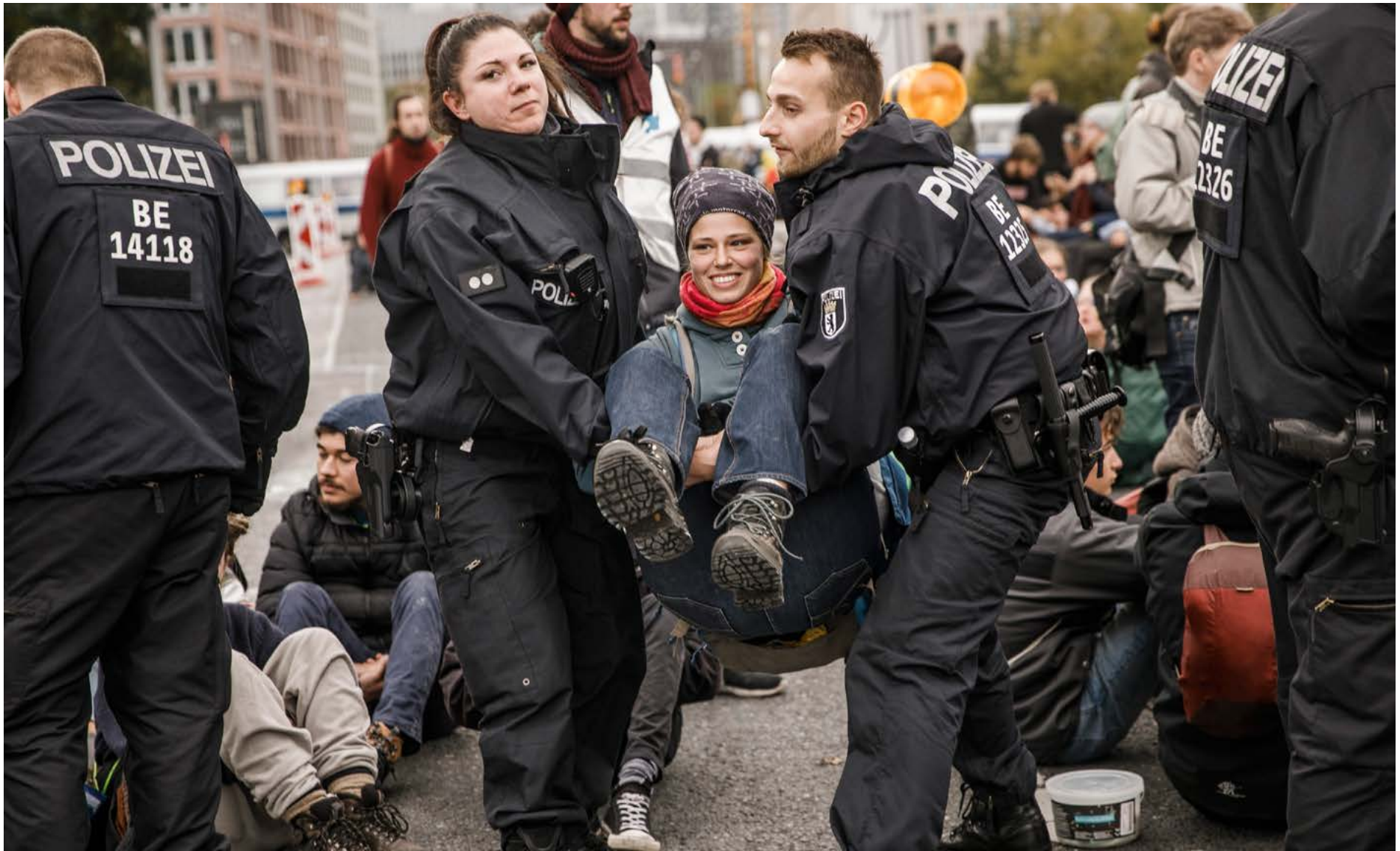
In February, one of XR's co-founders, Clare Farrell, **reported** that she had been barred from attending London Fashion Week after organising a protest calling attention to the role of the **fashion industry** in climate change: the growth of fast fashion, involving cheaply made garments that are shipped great distances and worn a handful of times before disposal, has exacerbated the industry's contribution to global carbon emissions. Soon afterwards, 150 XR activists formed a human roadblock and stopped traffic to urge the British Fashion Council to declare a climate emergency; the movement also **staged** a funeral march at the close of the next London Fashion Week, held in September.

The scale of the protests and disruption brought an increasingly strong police response. By the end of the 11-day occupation in April, **1,130 people** had been arrested; at times, the police were forced to stop arresting people because they had run out of places to hold them. Ahead of the October protests, the police pre-emptively **raided** a warehouse where XR was storing equipment and arrested 10 activists. During the October protests, the police initially **designated** Trafalgar Square, a common protest location, as the only legal protest site, and then when many refused to move and glued or locked themselves to protest sites, on 14 October the police **banned** all XR protests across London and ramped up their **clearances** of protest sites, **including** Trafalgar Square. The police were reported to have made **1,828 arrests** in October.

In response to the sheer scale of civil disobedience, police chiefs started talking to the government about the possibility of **changing** the law to give them greater pre-emptive powers, sparking concern about the right to protest. But XR achieved a legal victory in November when the High Court **overturned** the protest ban, finding that the police had exceeded their powers, and opening up the possibility that hundreds of protesters could sue for unlawful arrest.

As well as heavy policing, the movement was on the end of a backlash from many government politicians and media figures. In a sinister turn, in January 2020 it was **revealed** that XR had been listed as an extremist ideology in

a police counter-terrorism guide, alongside hardline Islamist and neo-Nazi groups. The guide formed part of the UK government's controversial **Prevent strategy**, which mandates schools and other statutory bodies to



Riot police carry a protester blocking a road during the Extinction Rebellion climate protests of October 2019 in Berlin, Germany. Credit: Carsten Koall/Getty Images

report people judged to be at risk of turning to terrorism or extremism on the basis of their views and actions. Under the guidance, teachers, local government officers and police officers were told to look out for people who took part in school walkouts or spoke in emotive terms about environmental issues.

Police said they would withdraw the guidance, although a further counter-terrorism list for teachers and medical practitioners subsequently **came to light** that included not only XR but also Greenpeace, a campaign against ocean pollution and even a group opposed to **badger culling**. Under the guidance, thousands of young people could potentially be branded as extremists merely for demanding action on the climate crisis. Given how often activism is conflated with terrorism in autocratic countries, the guidance from the UK government sent a concerning signal. It showed how much radical reframing is still needed to position actions that continue to cause climate harm as extremist rather than action for climate justice.

People also took XR actions in the USA in April, where an occupation outside New York's City Hall, blocking access to Brooklyn Bridge, demanded that the City of New York declare a climate emergency, and led to 62 arrests. The protest strategy combined with dialogue with city officials, leading to the city declaring a climate emergency at the end of June.

Another focus for XR activists in New York was media coverage of climate change, given the levels of disinformation that circulate and the use of the media by fossil fuel companies and their financiers to promote themselves and downplay the emergency. In June, XR activists protested outside the offices of **The New York Times**, calling on it to improve its coverage of the climate crisis and in particular withdraw its sponsorship of the Oil and Money conference, one of the world's largest oil industry meetings, held in the UK in October. Traffic was blocked, members of the group scaled the building and 70 people were **arrested**. The protest was successful: the newspaper **dropped** its sponsorship. Protesters also **focused** on Fox News, which **actively broadcasts** climate denial.

XR protesters also confronted politicians at the **US Capitol** in Washington DC in July. They glued themselves to doors and blocked politicians on

their way to attend a vote, urging them to pass a resolution on the climate emergency. The protest led to 17 arrests.

Actions quickly spread – across Europe and to Australia, Canada and **New Zealand** – followed by arrests. In Nova Scotia, Canada in April, four XR activists were **arrested** for disobeying orders to disperse and for damaging public property during a protest calling on the media to cover the climate emergency. In France in July, XR activists blocking a bridge to protest about climate crisis in the context of the ongoing heatwave were repelled with pepper spray and dragged away by the police. The French minister of the environment criticised the group and said they were not offering real solutions, although it was clear that something needed to be done: a **report** by the **Climate Council** revealed that France's government was not meeting its commitments under the Paris Agreement on climate change, despite President Emmanuel Macron's attempts to position the country as a world leader in the field; one of the domestic challenges was the opposition to attempts to increase car fuel taxes, the scale of which was demonstrated by the **gilets jaunes** movement that sprang to life in 2018. Against this backdrop it became vital for people demanding climate action to also make themselves visible.

In early October, marches and demonstrations were held in cities across **Australia**, where XR activists marched across bridges, gathered outside public buildings, obstructed traffic and disobeyed orders to disperse. Thirty activists were arrested and some had highly restrictive bail conditions **imposed** that banned them from entering city centres or contacting or going near other XR members. Place and time restrictions were also imposed on protests, and on 12 October nine protesters in Tasmania were **charged** when they refused to comply with police orders to move following the end of the permitted time for their demonstration. In Queensland, where XR protesters repeatedly disrupted traffic in the city of Melbourne, the state premier branded those blocking roads as extremists and **introduced** new penalties and extra police search powers. Civil society condemned the restrictions on the freedoms of expression and assembly, but government officials continued their policy of smearing climate activism, although Australia's XR movement received **support** from climate campaigners around the world.

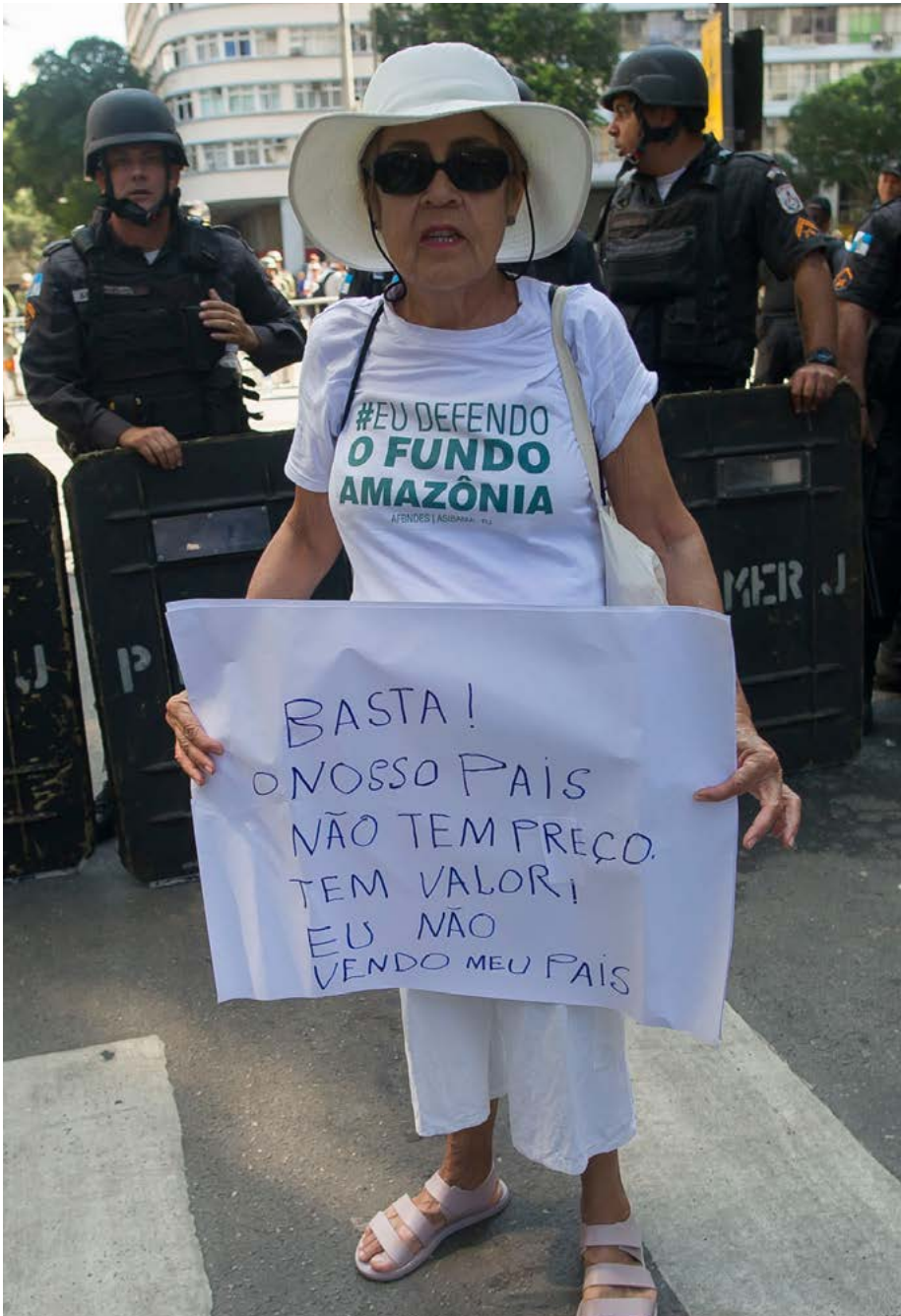
CLIMATE ACTIVISM: INFLUENCE, IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

Climate activism in 2019 involved a lot of people putting themselves forward, taking risks and making sacrifices. It worked. The mobilisation and resulting disruption was at such a scale and was so sustained that it could not help but generate headlines, and so achieved the first level of impact needed: climate change became a much bigger media story and more important political issue; some media outlets changed how they talked about and gave space to climate change, and at least some establishment politicians acknowledged the importance of the issue and the value of some of the actions undertaken.

In the wake of the school strikes and XR protests, the UK parliament became the first national legislative body in the world to **declare** a climate emergency, on 1 May, meeting the first demand of the XR movement. Many local authorities around the UK subsequently did the same. In May and June the parliaments of **Canada**, France, Ireland and Portugal followed suit, as did **Pope Francis**, and in November the **European Parliament**, spanning – at the time – 28 states, did so. Argentina was the first southern hemisphere country to declare a climate emergency in July, and Bangladesh the first Asian country in November. At the time of writing, 25 national parliaments and over 1,250 local authorities have **declared** a climate emergency, and the pressure on more to do so continues.

Of course, while these were important landmarks, they could only be first steps; action should follow declarations. While the UK government **announced** in June a commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050 – the first major economy to make such a commitment – this still fell short of the 2025 target demanded by XR, and many were dubious about whether the announcement, by the outgoing prime minister, would be adhered to by her successor.

Many were sceptical about what climate emergency declarations would mean in practice, and their scepticism was fuelled when the day after issuing its declaration, Canada's government **announced** it was still going ahead with its controversial Trans Mountain pipeline project, a vast piece of oil infrastructure that has been the subject of many **protests**



During celebrations of Brazil's independence, a woman in Rio de Janeiro holds a sign that reads 'Our country has no price, it has value'. Credit: Bruna Prado/Getty Images



A protester in Valencia, Spain, holds a sign to ask his fellow citizens 'Climate is changing - are you?' Credit: Nora Sicard

by environmental and Indigenous activists, with protests and arrests of protesters **continuing** in 2019. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's claim that the revenue generated by the project would be used to support transition to a green economy rang hollow to many. Too often the concern was that politicians were paying lip service: posing for a selfie with Greta Thunberg but failing to take the action that millions of people demanded.

Protests did seem to have some impact on public opinion. In a **poll** conducted in eight countries that are significant contributors to climate change – Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the UK and USA – published in September, most people recognised that there is a climate emergency and that governments are failing to tackle it. In all eight countries bar the USA, the climate crisis was identified as the most important issue facing the world. Most people surveyed said they are already seeing the impacts of climate change and believe time for action is running out. Most people wanted to see their governments take radical action, but believed governments would put the interests of fossil fuel companies first. In the face of the barrage of disinformation pushed by politicians, far-right groups and climate-harming industry, this high level of public concern was encouraging, and suggested that the message of mass mobilisations was cutting through.

There was some political impact too. In the USA, several potential Democratic presidential candidates committed to **support** the Green New Deal package of economic and environmental reforms that the youth-led Sunrise Movement is **campaigning** for. In September, a seven-hour televised town-hall **debate** of Democrat presidential contenders focused exclusively on climate change, the first time the subject had been given such a high profile within a presidential campaign. In the UK, the Labour Party promised a 'green industrial revolution' as part of its – ultimately unsuccessful – manifesto. In a submission to a court that was trying three XR activists for their role in April's protests, senior opposition politician John McDonnell **testified** that the protests had raised the profile of climate action and the need for radical action among politicians, leading to the climate emergency declaration and helping to inspire his party's policy programme. The connections between grassroots civil society action and formal political debate as complementary arenas of democratic expression and policy action were made abundantly clear.

But the question remains whether this climate concern will inform political choices: whether the issue retains its salience when people come to cast their votes. In 2019 the picture was mixed. One of the stories of the European Parliament elections in May was a ‘green wave’, at least in some countries. In Germany the trend was most marked: the Green Party doubled its vote, to 21 per cent, coming second overall. In France and Ireland the equivalent parties both came third and gained seats, while in the UK, birthplace of the XR movement, the Green Party also gained support and seats. This was of course not the only story of the European Parliament elections, which also saw far-right populists and nationalists making gains in several contexts, although not on the level expected ([see section](#)). Overall, the results left the European Parliament fragmented, potentially opening up space for the green group to have some influence.

But in the UK, while the climate emergency was the only issue that threatened to keep the vexed question of Brexit off the front pages in 2019, it did not translate into voting decisions. The newly formed Brexit Party was the clear winner of the European Parliament election. And while climate change seemed a potentially huge political issue before the UK’s December general election was called, once the campaign was underway the momentum dissipated. It never threatened to turn into a climate change election, and Brexit once again dominated; the winning Conservative Party was the one that **said the least** about climate change in its manifesto and refused to attend a televised debate on the subject.

In Canada’s October election too, a planned national debate on climate change was not held, **cancelled** when the Conservative Party representative refused to attend. It seemed that in national elections – as opposed to the broader-reaching European Parliament elections – the global crisis of climate change and the need for international action could not compete with national-level issues.

Part of the response might be to broaden the climate justice movement still further. Certainly, XR in particular faced criticism over the relative lack of diversity of its participants. XR actions in 2019 clearly focused in countries of the global north, and there is some justification for this: wealthy and industrialised countries have a particular responsibility to act as they



Young people advocate for radical solutions to climate change during the Global Climate Strike in New York, USA. Credit: Clara Sanchiz

have most driven and benefited from an economic model that causes climate harm. But in the multicultural city of London, XR faced **criticisms** that it was a peculiarly white protest. When activists **disrupted** a London Underground train in a working-class part of London in October, potentially preventing people in precarious employment from getting to work on time, the movement was criticised for being out of touch and targeting those with the least power; the reaction of commuters was to drag the activists off the roof of the train and physically attack them. These are people who surely the movement should hope to win over and help mobilise.

The many arrests of XR activists was not a by-product of the protests, but rather a tactic baked into activism. Many who participate in XR arrests expect to get arrested, but more than this, they intend to be arrested. Mass arrests are both a tactic and metric, because they generate headlines and get across the sense that business as usual is no longer tenable in the face of the climate crisis. They also hope to tie up the criminal justice system with the aim of building pressure on the state. Of course, these tactics run the risk of alienating people who are concerned about the climate but draw the line at disruption and law-breaking.

The tactics can also play to criticisms that XR protesters are privileged and elitist. Activists decide whether they can be part of the ranks of the 'arrestables'. These are people who essentially know they can afford to get arrested and caught up in the criminal justice system. This is a tactic that acknowledges that not everyone can take this risk; getting arrested can be more dangerous for people in excluded groups, people in precarious employment and people with previous convictions, who can expect to face harsher treatment and experience greater personal impacts. But while the choice of the tactic is understandable, it puts a particular face on the protests, and could be accused of playing to rather than challenging problems such as institutionalised racism; as such, the criticism is that it risks overlooking the disproportionate impact of climate change on excluded groups and the need for intersectional responses.

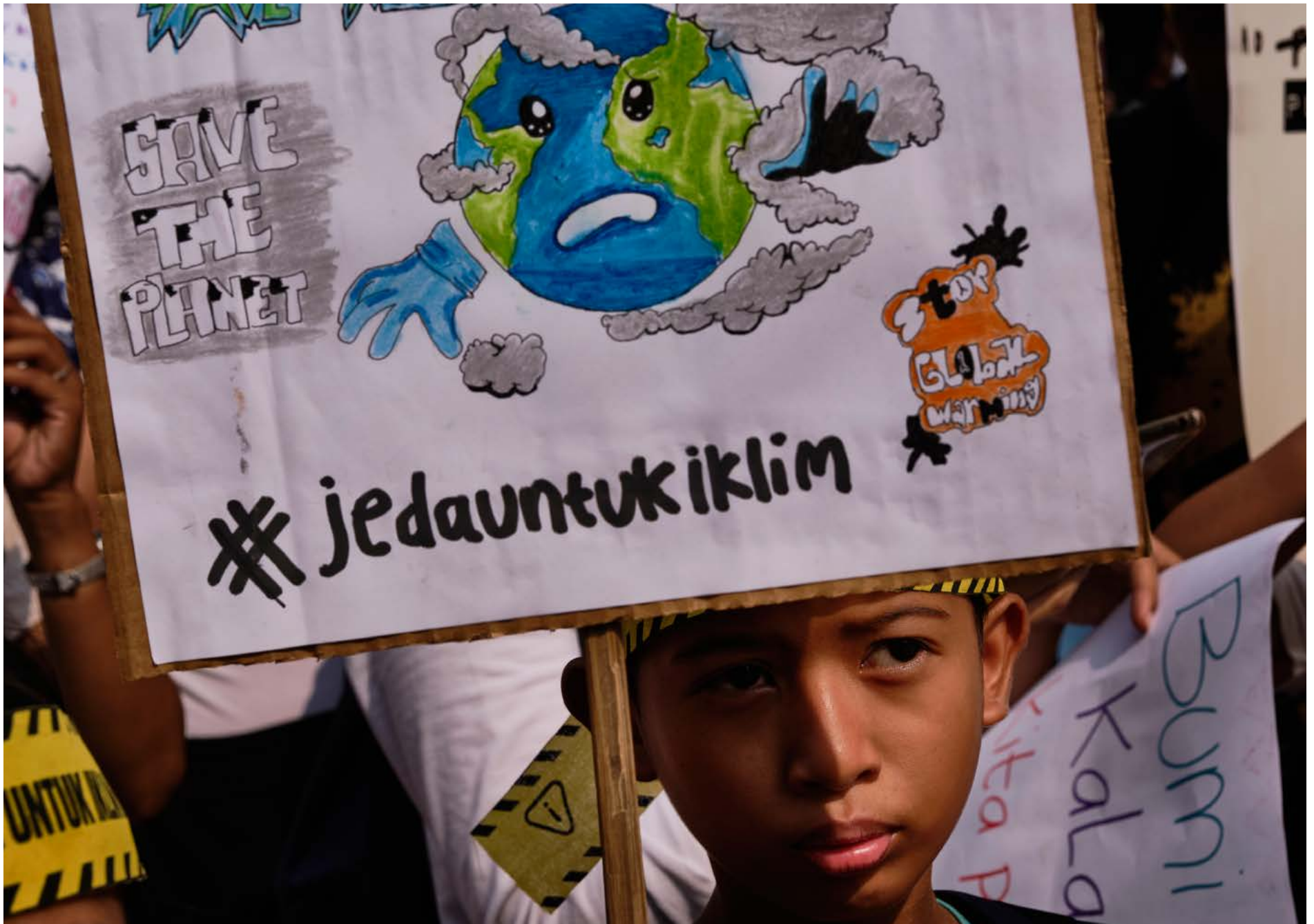
In seeking to make the movement global and encourage greater action in the global south, there will surely be a need to adapt tactics that prioritise obstruction and arrest: in contexts of highly restricted civic space, doing

so could open the door to state violence and lengthy detention; it can be unfair to ask people to put themselves on the line in such circumstances.

After all, part of the story of 2019 was of the global south's adoption and adaption of the school strike model; it was just a story that was much less often told. The need in response is to put front and centre the stories and experiences of the many powerful young climate activists in the **global south**; not to assert that Greta Thunberg is exceptional, but rather that there are millions of Greta Thunbergs showing moral leadership around the world.

Looking ahead, the climate justice movement faces some key questions: how can declarations of climate emergency be used as leverage in advocacy for climate action? How can shifts in public opinion lead to concerted political action and different political choices? How can dangers such as activism fatigue and the public becoming used to once-attention-grabbing tactics be averted? How can a decentralised movement avoid offering mixed messages? How can tactics that disrupt everyday life be squared with a need to recruit supporters and broaden the make-up of the movement?

As the climate justice movement evolves it will need to tackle these questions, but what cannot be doubted is that the various facets of the movement have mobilised many people into activism for the first time. A sentiment expressed time and again by people taking part was that they were not sure whether what they were doing would have any impact, but they simply had to do something. They were simply compelled to act. They had to communicate their concern about climate crisis. Even in countries supposedly long-established as mature democracies, people felt they were being failed by governments and political parties, and they had to do something beyond voting. In the face of institutional complacency and the awesome financial power of climate-harming companies, people felt they had no choice other than to resort to direct action and, if necessary, peaceful law-breaking. People may have been acting out of desperation, but through taking action they found a sense of collective hope. In doing so, they changed the nature of the debate on climate change and brought this existential threat to renewed and urgent attention. There should be no going back from this.



A student participates in a demonstration calling for action on climate change in September 2019 in Jakarta, Indonesia. Credit: Ed Wray/Getty Images

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JONATHAN MESULAM, PAPUA
NEW GUINEA



DEFENDING THE PLANET IN THE COURTS: LEGAL ACTION IN KENYA, INDONESIA, SLOVENIA AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The story of climate and environmental activism is not solely one of mass and direct action. Civil society is also increasingly taking court action to hold the powerful to account. A **study** published in July found that around 1,300 climate lawsuits against states and companies had been filed in 28 countries since 1990. In the USA, legal challenges have played a key role in helping to prevent many of the Trump administration’s attempts to reduce environmental protection regulations.

In Kenya in July, a court **revoked** the environmental licence for the construction of the country’s first-ever coal-fired power station. The project was financially backed by China and supported by the US Ambassador to Kenya, who accused a US-based CSO that produced a report criticising the project of being ‘highly paid protesters’. The court ruled that the backers of the project had failed to carry out adequate environmental impact assessments or inform the local community – among them farmers, fishers and people working in tourism – about the likely impacts. The power station, if it is eventually allowed to go ahead, would vastly increase Kenya’s greenhouse gas emissions, in direct contradiction to its Paris Agreement commitments.

Civil society won a similar victory in Slovenia in February, when the environmental permit for a power plant was **withdrawn** following a court case brought by a CSO. The court found that the company behind the power plant had failed to provide environmental studies and data to the CSO. However, success brought something of a backlash, as media and politicians questioned the right and competence of environmental CSOs to have a say, and CSOs were accused of bias and inaccuracy. In an apparent reversal of generally quite open recent relationships between environmental groups and the state, the prime minister **went on to say** that not all CSOs are working in the public interest and CSOs deemed not to be acting in the public interest should be restricted. The message seemed to be that civil society would be tolerated as long as it did not question powerful financial interests.

Proposals to establish deep-sea mines in Papua New Guinea in 2009 sparked civil society resistance that included **legal action**. After a decade, in 2019 the company behind the project was declared bankrupt. **Jonathan Mesulam** of the **Alliance of Solwara Warriors** in Papua New Guinea describes the civil society campaign of which legal action was an important part:

Seabed mining is a new frontier for the mining industry and is very risky as our understanding of the seabed is very limited. The first discovery of deep-sea minerals was in 1979 and we have no idea how the seabed ecosystem operates. If we allow seabed mining, then we may just call for the end



Activists in Papua New Guinea mobilise against deep-sea mining in September 2019. Credit: Alliance of Solwara Warriors @Facebook

of humanity, as the complexity of the food chains on which humans depend will be affected, putting human life at risk. I think we should all stand in solidarity to ban deep-sea mining in our area because the sea has no boundaries and when the marine ecosystem is affected, everyone everywhere is at risk.

*Environmental and legal groups have urged extreme **caution** around seabed mining, arguing there are potentially massive – and unknown – ramifications for the environment and for nearby communities, and that the global regulatory framework is not yet drafted, and is currently deficient.*

The campaign against seabed mining has been very challenging and at times we almost lost hope because of the heavy presence of Nautilus, the company behind the Solwara project, at the project site for the last eight years. However, there has been growing opposition from coastal communities, local and international CSOs and churches, especially the Catholic and Lutheran churches. An environmental law firm, the Centre for Environment and Community Rights, filed a legal

case and we were able to stop this project from going into full-scale mining operation. Every concerned individual and organisation has played a very important role in their respective areas of work, such as finance, the environment and politics, to stop this project.

*During the Pacific Islands Leaders Forum, held in Tuvalu in August 2019, Pacific Island leaders also called for a 10-year moratorium on deep-sea mining. But that is not what we wanted. We are **calling** for a total ban on deep-sea mining.*

In Indonesia too, in 2019 environmental activists started **court action** against the government over air quality in the capital, Jakarta, which is at times the world's most polluted city. What examples such as these point to is that civil society is engaging across the spectrum – from disruption and mass protests to conventional advocacy and legal action – and from local to national and international levels, as the scale of the climate emergency and environmental crisis demands.

STILL MORE ACTION NEEDED IN A BURNING WORLD: CLIMATE CRISIS IN BRAZIL, BOLIVIA AND COLOMBIA

But the problems are still profound, and there can be no doubting the scale of the challenge that faces civil society. The tilt towards right-wing populism and nationalism seen in many parts of the world ([see section](#)) is also a movement towards climate denial and climate-harming actions, and against the space people need to protest, make demands and hold governments to account.

Perhaps nowhere were the connections between dysfunctional politics, failure to act on the climate crisis and the denial of space for civil society as profoundly made clear as in Brazil. The Amazon fires that raged in August were at a different level from those usually seen at that time of year: at one point it was reported that fires were up **84 per cent** on 2018. The Amazon contains 40 per cent of the world's rainforest and plays a key role in capturing carbon, but there are fears that it could soon be approaching a catastrophic **tipping point** where it decisively dries out and starts releasing its stored carbon into the atmosphere.



People hold crosses in protest at the loss of Amazon rainforest and Indigenous land and lives during an Independence Day parade in September 2019 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
Credit: Bruna Prado/Getty Images

Hard-right populist President Jair Bolsonaro took office in January having **won power** on a polarising platform that included attacking Indigenous peoples, promising to develop the Amazon and – although the government

has not yet done so – withdraw from the Paris Agreement, which was characterised as an assault on Brazil's sovereignty. An early restructure of Brazil's foreign ministry signalled changed priorities, as it **abolished**

departments that coordinated international policy on climate change and the environment.

Bolsonaro's presidency gave the green light to ramp up deforestation of the Amazon for logging, ranching and mining, including in Indigenous areas: satellite data published in July revealed a **huge increase** in deforestation in the first six months of Bolsonaro's presidency. President Bolsonaro denied the reality of the picture revealed and turned on the messenger, **firing** the head of the National Space Research Institute when he defended the data. Emboldened by deregulation and messages coming from the new government, farming interests lit more fires to clear land for cattle and crops. By the end of the year the Brazilian government's data was showing that Amazon deforestation was at its highest annual level for a **decade**, marking the reversal of years of initiatives that had encouraged better management of this precious environment.

The government also unilaterally **suspended** the steering committee of the Amazon Fund, an international initiative to support sustainable management of the rainforest, causing the governments of Germany and largest donor Norway to suspend their support. The move by the government of Brazil formed part of its campaign to **close down** the many advisory and consultative councils – including its commissions on forests and biodiversity – in which civil society played a role. The government also **claimed** that civil society, which is eligible to apply for the Amazon Fund, was misusing funding. Brazil's government was making very clear the link between attacks on civil society and climate harm.

Adriana Ramos of **Instituto Socioambiental** outlines some of the ways in which the Brazilian government closed down the space for civil society's climate action:

Various councils, committees and commissions that used to function as formal spaces for civil society participation in policy-making have been shut down. Regarding climate policy in particular, the National Commission for Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, the Climate Fund's Steering Committee and the Amazon Fund's Steering Committee were affected,

which used to be important forums for the implementation of national climate change policies.

The government also attempted to eliminate the Ministry of Environment because they thought there was no need for environmental policy. As the proposal to eliminate it had a negative reaction among the public, the Ministry has remained in place, but it is now dedicated to dismantling existing environmental policies and legislation.

The government is behaving antagonistically toward civil society. Its belligerent and aggressive tone hinders the possibility of dialogue. There is no respect for the role of civil society. All of this reflects on the performance of organisations working on the frontline. The suspension of the Amazon Fund has precluded many planned projects and jeopardised ongoing ones.

As the Amazon fires commanded global attention, rather than acknowledge the problem and the need to act, President Bolsonaro engaged in outrageous but now typical deflection tactics: absurdly, he **claimed** that environmental CSOs were starting the fires in order to damage the government's reputation in **retaliation** for their loss of funding. Indigenous groups and environmental CSOs were characterised as unpatriotic obstacles to national economic development – a key part of the **strategy** to open up the Amazon for economic exploitation – while in another bizarre outburst, actor and environmental campaigner Leonardo DiCaprio was **accused** of funding Amazon arson as part of an international campaign against Brazil. International concern was rejected as foreign interference in Brazil's sovereign affairs; the Amazon is often referred to as the 'lungs of the world' but Bolsonaro's platform is one of narrow nationalism and presidential sovereignty, so the Amazon fires were **positioned** as a purely domestic issue and offers of support from the G7 were **dismissed** as European colonialism. The purpose of these tactics was to sow outrage and division as a way of preventing focus and action on the causes of the fires.

Over 100 CSOs came together to **condemn** the accusations made against them, and make clear that President Bolsonaro's anti-environment policies



Protesters take part in a night vigil in Lisbon, Portugal, in August 2019, to denounce Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's environmental policies and their impacts on the Amazon rainforest. Credit: Horacio Villalobos/Corbis via Getty Images

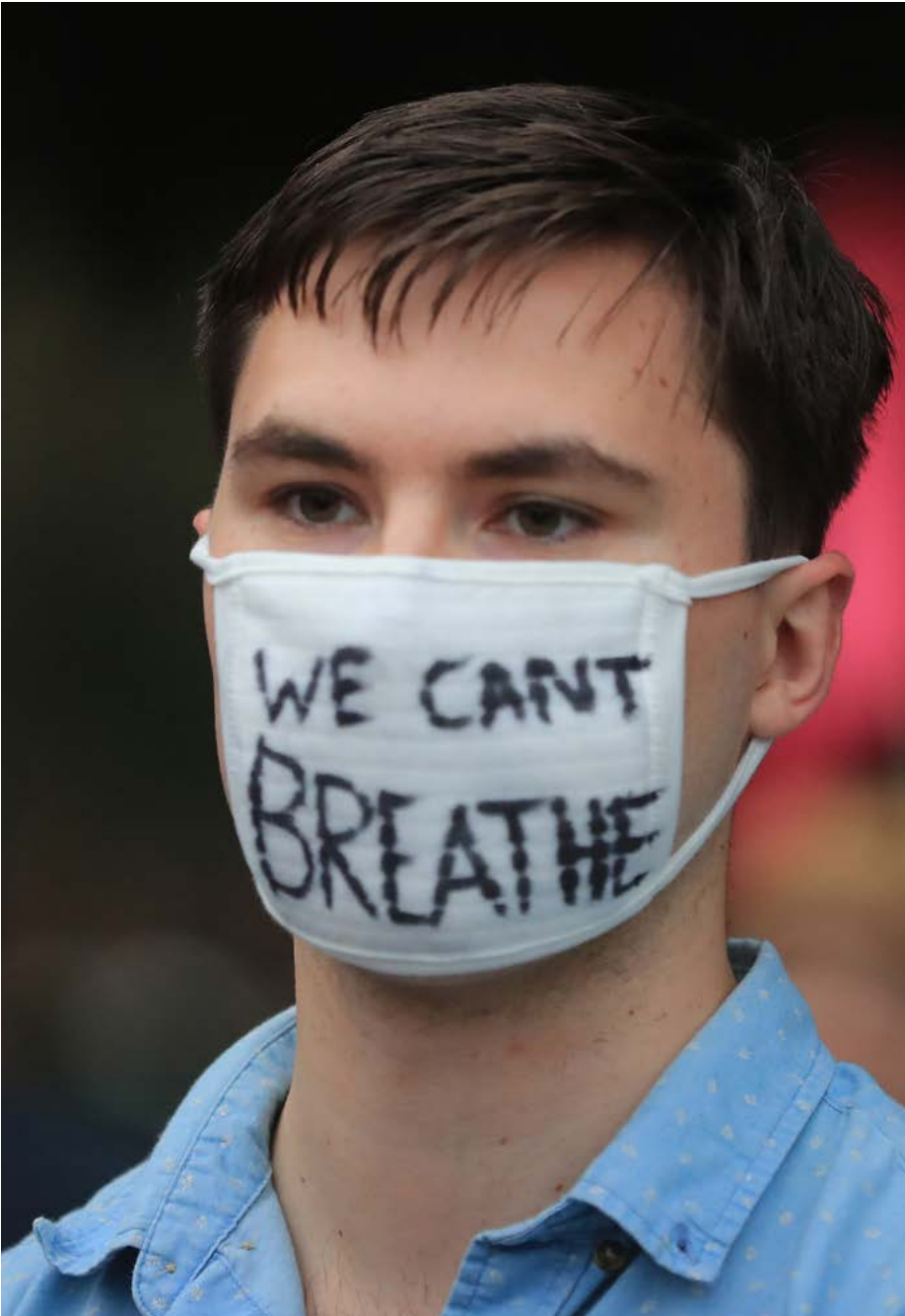
were to blame, and in August environmental CSOs organised protests in several Brazilian cities. Solidarity **protests** were held elsewhere in Latin America. Over 60,000 people were reported to have taken part in the **Global Climate Strike** in Brazil in September.

President Bolsonaro's slurs may have been absurd, but for civil society on the frontline it was no laughing matter: in November, four volunteer firefighters were **arrested** and accused of starting wildfires, while the office of a CSO connected to voluntary firefighters, the Health and Happiness Project, was **raided**. The suppression – including by violent **criminal networks** – of civil society and its ability to defend environmental and Indigenous rights and assert accountability for government and business decisions is a key tactic of those who seek the untrammelled economic exploitation of the Amazon.

Right-wing forces that support the expansion of farming, logging and mining have accordingly been emboldened by the government. Threats to environmental defenders and invasions of Indigenous lands **dramatically increased** in 2019, and a November meeting of hundreds of environmental defenders was **disrupted** by farmers and landowners chanting nationalist slogans.

Adriana describes some of the impacts of the accusations on civil society:

Their first effect has been to drain all our energies by forcing us to focus on responding to atrocious accusations. When the president makes such statements, the press is obliged to disseminate them, and we end up having to defend ourselves. We are put in a position where



An activist wearing a mask participates in a rally for climate action in Sydney, Australia, in December 2019. Credit: Mark Evans/Getty Images

we need to respond to completely baseless statements made by the president. This is clearly a demobilisation strategy, as it paralyses our main activities and hinders the work of CSOs.

There is little understanding of civil society in our country. As a result, such statements send a prejudiced message to the public and promote misinformation and a misreading of the role of civil society. This is happening within the framework of a larger system that is actively promoting 'fake news'. It ends up creating a cascade effect.

*During his election campaign the president promised to 'end all activism in Brazil'. We see the government acting consistently with this promise, promoting lawlessness and delegitimising the work of environmental defenders. This reflects directly in the increased lack of safety in the field and the sense of impunity that strengthens those who act illegally. Illegal activities are promoted in the Amazon region, such as illegal logging, illegal mining and land grabbing, all of which are sources of conflict. Those who have historically been the perpetrators of violence against Indigenous peoples and environmental leaders come out stronger. In addition, the president's authoritarian approach ends up mobilising public security forces. Public security forces, which should be working to defend vulnerable groups, are guided by a policy that criminalises and marginalises these groups. Thus, Brazil will probably continue to be listed as one of the **most dangerous** countries in the world for environmental defenders.*

In difficult circumstances Brazilian civil society is still doing its best, and Adriana sees a possible upside in the Amazon fires and the attention they received, in galvanising more people into environmental action:

We have sought to ensure the constitutional conditions for an active civil society, coordinating various efforts to guarantee the safety of defenders in the field and strengthen protection strategies for the social leaders who are in the most vulnerable positions. We need to innovate in our methods in order to be able to get through these times. It is an unfortunate situation, but I think Brazilian civil society is quite experienced in facing adverse situations and is trying to become stronger in this context.

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RODRIGO MERUVIA, BOLIVIA



Every day more people are interested in mobilising and are reacting to what is happening. They begin to understand that this is a cross-cutting theme, as there is no economy or health without a healthy environment. Because of the current denial of environmental policy, the theme draws even more attention. Without a doubt, this can contribute to strengthening civil society and prompt more people to mobilise, participate and stay attuned to what is happening. That is the positive aspect of the current situation.

The problems were not just limited to Brazil or countries with right-wing governments. In August, huge fires broke out in the forests of neighbouring Bolivia, causing particular threat to Indigenous people. People pointed the finger of blame at then-President Evo Morales, who had once positioned himself as someone committed to environmental protection. As in Brazil, people **blamed** deforestation, caused by a law change in July that encouraged increasing farming through slash-and-burn approaches. Some Indigenous people accused a president who had once championed them of selling them out to agribusiness: Bolsonaro and Morales are far apart on the political spectrum, but both appeared to be putting national economic development ahead of concern for the climate.

People protested about the government’s slow response, and Indigenous people marched in the affected areas. At an event to mark the country’s first beef exports to China in August, protesters broke in, **pointing** to the role of ranching in deforestation. As the fires went on, President Morales was forced to **reverse** his earlier position of rejecting any international help to tackle the fires.

Rodrigo Meruvia of the Gaia Pacha Foundation is clear that the state’s promotion of harmful agribusiness practices was to blame, and that the impacts have been profound:

Protests in Bolivia expressed demands related mainly to the forest fires that come hand in hand with the expansion of the agricultural frontier. Their main demand was the repeal of domestic laws that benefit agribusiness and neglect the protection of forests.

*Bolivian laws do not protect forests, but rather the opposite. In mid-2019, just a few months before 2019’s great forest fires, the government enacted **decree 3973**, which authorised clearance for agricultural activities in private and community lands in the departments of Beni and Santa Cruz, and allowed controlled fires. In other words, the law gives free rein to any owner interested in expanding their production space, whether for livestock or agriculture. Unfortunately, this has been the position of the state so far, and in our experience whether there were leftist or right-wing governments in place has not made any difference. Beyond the party ideology of the incumbent government, there’s the interests of the agribusiness sector, which are much more permanent and broader, since they involve not only local actors but also transnational companies.*

We believe that the cause of the fires is primarily human in origin, since they are started to expand the agricultural frontier. This is how about five and a half million hectares have already been burned. To give an idea of the dimensions of the disaster, the area that has been burned in the lowlands of Bolivia is almost the same size as Guatemala. And not only the forest is lost, but also the entire habitat is degraded, the water sources of some communities disappear and the effects of this extend beyond Bolivia, as bioclimates and rainfall change.

We understand that the phenomenon that affects us is part of a bigger problem, which this year had several expressions in the form of fires in the Brazilian Amazon, in African countries and in Australia. As there is insufficient rainfall due to climate change, forests are much more prone to burning. In addition to agricultural expansion policies, especially those aimed at growing soybeans – which in addition are genetically modified – this makes these places much more vulnerable. The consequences of this are suffered not only by the population living in the territories where these incidents occur, which is directly affected, but also by the general population.

Bolivian fires continued until **heavy rainfall** finally brought them to an end in October.

Deforestation also remained a huge issue in Colombia, where a peace process stalled for political reasons by the country's new president has thrown up further problems of private sector expansion, as an anonymous young environmental activist relates:

The most urgent environmental problem is deforestation. Deforestation rates in Colombia are very high, and the situation has not improved following the signing of the peace agreements. That is because, in times of armed conflict, the Colombian guerrillas, mainly the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), controlled much of the jungle territory of Colombia. Of course, no one dared get into that territory: multinationals and oil companies did not have a presence there; nor did the industry of cattle-raising. After the peace agreements were signed and the guerrillas withdrew, the problem that has plagued Colombia since the 1950s – land distribution – increased.

Colombia has extremely regressive land distribution, with land property concentrated in very few hands. With the withdrawal of the guerrillas and the arrival of multinational corporations, land grabbing has increased. Lands are privately appropriated, deforested and used for raising livestock, while the local population continues to be displaced.

At the same time, there are still active armed groups operating outside the law, particularly far-right paramilitary groups, alongside the smaller guerrilla force of the National Liberation Army and some FARC dissidents who refused to engage with the peace process. These armed groups are

“WITH THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE GUERRILLAS AND THE ARRIVAL OF MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS, LAND GRABBING HAS INCREASED. THE LOCAL POPULATION CONTINUES TO BE DISPLACED.”

ANONYMOUS, COLOMBIA



fighting over the territory with the aim of taking control of coca crops and expanding them, causing greater deforestation.

Therefore, both the continuation of the conflict in some territories and its termination in others are having a direct influence on deforestation. The peace process contains a series of mechanisms to counteract deforestation, but its effects will depend on whether it is effectively implemented. In that sense, the protection of the environment is inseparable from the success of the peace process.

As soon as he took office, President Iván Duque objected to the peace process and tried to modify all aspects that he did not agree with or that he claimed were not fair. If he succeeds, this would ultimately mean a deactivation of the process that resulted from the agreements and the need to start over from scratch. This was no surprise: his entire campaign revolved around the peace process and was based on the dissemination of lies about it. He also lied regarding his plans for extractive industries: he stated that oil exploration and exploitation through fracking would not be authorised, but in late December he drafted a decree that would allow fracking.

Wildfires also raged in **Siberia**, Russia in August, while a sharp **increase** in forest fires in Indonesia in September had people complaining about the smoke hundreds of miles away in Malaysia. And then at the year's end and into 2020, the worst **bushfires** in living memory ravaged a huge swathe of south-east Australia. A massive voluntary effort mobilised to fight the fires and help those affected by them, but at the time of writing at least 28 people had been killed along with millions of animals, and 3,000 homes destroyed. In January 2020, air pollution in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney was amongst the worst in the world, and the pollution even reached New Zealand. Drought and soaring temperatures had effectively extended and worsened Australia's usual bushfire season.

CLIMATE DISINFORMATION AND DENIAL THE POLITICS OF INACTION IN AUSTRALIA AND THE USA

Australia's unique ecology is particularly vulnerable to climate change. But the vast island is also rich in coal, and Australia is, according to some measures, the **largest** coal exporter in the world. In 2014 the centre-right coalition that has been in power since 2013 abolished a carbon pricing scheme intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and has since made the exploitation of coal, particularly for export to Asia, a central plank of its economic plan. As a result, the refusal to take the climate crisis seriously has evidently become Australia's long-term political policy, prompting the response of school strikes and XR protests discussed above.

One headline controversial project has been the proposed development of a vast new coalmine in Queensland, in collaboration with an Indian company. A huge environmental **movement** has formed to resist the Adani coalmine and port, including through occupation and **blocking access** to the site, mass protests, legal action and advocacy towards financiers to withdraw. In response, the governments of both Australia and India have **accused** CSOs



A woman urges governments to tell the truth about climate change during a protest in London, UK, in February 2019. Credit: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

campaigning against the mine of being agents of foreign influence while the campaigning organisation Get Up! has been **smeared** by Prime Minister Morrison as being linked to rival political parties. In July a French TV crew was **arrested** and charged with trespass for filming protesters who were blocking access to the coal terminal; as a condition of receiving bail, the crew was banned from going within 20 km of the site.

Prime Minister Morrison has a track record of **climate denial**. Morrison won the leadership of his party in 2018 when his predecessor was ousted, in part for attempting to introduce a new, bipartisan climate policy, and then won the May election after **positioning** climate action as an issue pushed by metropolitan elites disconnected from working-class concerns. As well as criticising climate strikers, he is also infamous for once brandishing a **piece of coal** to parliament to show his support for the industry. He is clearly not alone in his government. The minister for water resources, drought and natural disasters – Australia experienced one of its worst droughts in memory in 2019, contributing to the bushfires – questioned the human-made nature of the climate crisis and received **support** from other cabinet members. In September, a ruling-party senator **compared** the Conversation website to the Nazis when it stated it would no longer give a platform to climate change deniers.

The Australian government also used its international influence to prevent coordinated action on climate change. At the Pacific Islands Forum in August, Scott Morrison **pressured** other Pacific leaders to delete from the meeting's outcome documents any references to keeping warming at below 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, planning for net zero emissions by 2050 or limiting the use of coal. The meeting took place in Tuvalu, whose low-lying islands are **at risk** of being engulfed by sea level rise and whose population are experiencing climate-change-related illnesses. Prime Minister Morrison also refused to attend the UN Climate Action Summit in September.

The government still insists that the country, one of the largest per capita greenhouse gas emitters, is on track to meet its Paris Agreement commitments; international bodies, civil society and the **Climate Change Performance Index** – which ranks Australia among the worst-performing

countries – are clear that it is not, and call attention to Australia's use of a technical **loophole** involving legacy carbon credits towards its already weak targets. A planned **further wave** of fossil fuel developments would push Australia even further away from meeting its international commitments.

Civil society mobilised to try to shift the official position. Ahead of the May election, 13 people were **arrested** for staging a climate change protest on Sydney Harbour Bridge. In November, the International Mining and Resources Conference, Australia's largest annual fossil fuel industry event, bringing over 7,000 delegates from around the world to Melbourne, was also a focus of **protests**. Over 40 people were arrested for protesting at the event.

The severity of the 2019 fires may just have changed the political equation. Scott Morrison was **criticised** for taking a holiday as the crisis worsened, and then on his return met with an often **angry** reaction when he visited affected areas. He also attracted **criticism** for apparently trying to score partisan political advantage from the government's response. People pointed to cuts in fire services and preparedness; international medical research has also shown that Australia's federal government has left its population at **significant risk** of ill health through the impacts of climate change. However, Morrison continued to deny that there was a clear link between climate change and the fires.

Rain in early 2020 that **dampened** the fires brought some much-needed short-term relief to embattled communities. Australia's civil society will continue to try to make its politicians commit to serious, long-term climate action.

The USA is also led by a climate denier, and disinformation spread from the top by President Trump appears to have had an impact on public opinion. A **survey** of 23 countries published in May found that only Saudi Arabia and Indonesia have a higher percentage of people than the USA who do not believe the climate is changing or do not believe change is human-made. Given President Trump's ongoing denial of the climate crisis, combined with heavy political lobbying and the spread of disinformation by fossil fuel giants, that is not surprising.



Protesters stage a 'die-in' in May 2019 in Melbourne, Australia. Credit: Quinn Rooney/Getty Images

In March President Trump **tweeted** about climate change being 'fake news' and 'fake science', incorrectly quoting Greenpeace in doing so. He has repeatedly **accused** environmental activists of having a hidden political agenda. In September six former government scientists **reported** that under the Trump administration their research had been suspended or silenced. One of them was transferred to an auditing position for which he had no expertise the day before he was scheduled to speak at the UN about climate change adaptation.

As a result, the USA has **polarised** politically on climate change: under Trump's presidency, Republican politicians have voted for environmental legislation only five per cent of the time, compared to Democrats, who have voted for such laws 92 per cent of the time. The fossil fuel industry knows who its friends are, and now almost exclusively funds Republicans. **Republican politicians** have rejected scientific evidence of declining biodiversity and increasing global temperatures, at least as human-made phenomena.

Denial has had practical impacts. For example, in August, the Trump administration **announced** plans to roll back requirements introduced by the Obama administration that oil and gas drillers should prevent methane leaks, even though science is clear about methane's contribution to climate change. Top-down denial has also led to a wave of legislation that restricts civic action by making it harder to protest against climate harm. At the time of writing, since Trump took office in 2017, seven US states had **passed laws** increasing punishments for protesting – or even planning to protest – at oil and gas pipeline sites, under the guise of protecting pipeline safety, and legislation was under consideration in at least six other states. These laws were **lobbied for** by fossil fuel giants, following the mass **protests** from 2016 onwards against the Dakota Access Pipeline running through the Standing Rock Indigenous Reservation that delayed the project and damaged its reputation. In June it was **announced** that the US federal government was considering introducing legislation to bring in sentences of up to 20 years for inhibiting operation of a pipeline.

In Germany, the extreme-right party Alternative for Germany embraced climate change as a major part of its **political platform** in 2019, supported by sceptical scientists linked to US conservatives. Party leaders engaged in smear campaigns targeting Greta Thunberg and other environmental activists. In the UK, the Institute of Economic Affairs, one of the most influential right-of-centre think tanks with close links to the current government, was revealed to have **published** at least four books and several other reports questioning climate science.

Fossil fuel giants – who were **among the first** to know that climate change was happening – have for decades used their vast resources to fuel disinformation and engage in intensive political lobbying. They use social media to position themselves as investors in low-carbon alternatives while also using **fake grassroots groups** to promote their extractive practices, including fracking. For example, the Koch brothers, fossil fuel billionaires who back a range of hard-right causes, fund the CO2 Coalition Organization, which even claims that carbon emissions are good for the planet. As mentioned above, Google's **backing** of conservative think tanks and climate change deniers in spite of its public position of supporting climate action made them a focus of XR protests in 2019. Several of

those benefiting from Google's support have campaigned against climate legislation and environmental protection. Among them, the Competitive Enterprise Institute helped the Trump administration withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Google has also sponsored meetings of conservative groups that deny climate change and mock climate activists, such as the anti-science group Heartland Institution, which accused Greta Thunberg of 'climate delusion hysterics'.

Disinformation is being driven by a battery of bots, which is skewing the territory and terms on which climate discourse takes place: **a quarter** of all tweets on climate change – that deny the science, support inaction and smear the climate action movement – are not from people but from bots, working day and night to try to make fringe opinions appear mainstream. This is a disinformation industry that would not be possible without considerable financial backing.

This is the scale of the challenge civil society is fighting back against. Lacking the resources of the fossil fuel giants that cause so much climate harm, civil society must respond with mass mobilisations and tactics that grab attention, stimulate imaginations and inspire action for change. In responding as civil society, we need to take on and expose the political and economic drivers behind climate denial, even though doing so opens us up to risk.

CIVIC SPACE FOR CLIMATE ACTION UNDER ATTACK: EXPERIENCES FROM CHILE, COLOMBIA, PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND THE PHILIPPINES

In many of the above examples, civil society action on climate change has met with various forms of attack and restriction. These include the vilification of activists and the spread of disinformation about them and their motives, from political leaders and online trolls alike; the introduction of new laws and the misuse of existing ones, including **anti-terrorism laws**, to prevent or restrict protests and to detain people who take part in them; and the illegal use of excessive force by security forces to prevent or disperse protests. Companies are also using **lawsuits** to try to silence critics and journalists.



Members of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca join the national strike in Bogotá, Colombia, in November 2019, to protest government inaction to address concerns over security, corruption, land rights and inequality. Credit: Juan David Moreno Gallego/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

For many climate activists, these various forms of restriction and violence exercised by states, corporations and climate-denying anti-rights groups are an everyday reality, and impunity for the abuses committed is widespread.

Consistently, environmental, land and Indigenous rights defenders are the

activists that have most come under attack. Because demanding climate action challenges established power, it is an intrinsically political act, and that can make it dangerous. In contexts where civic space is already highly restricted and contested, the threats to climate activists can be acute.

“IF WE DON’T FIGHT
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UNBEARABLE TO OUR
COMMUNITIES.”

JHEWOUNG CAPATOY,
PHILIPPINES



Colombia is one such dangerous context, as an anonymous young environmental activist describes:

*In Colombia people are afraid to speak, organise and protest. Colombians live in a state of incredible anxiety due to the systematic murders of social and environmental leaders. Colombia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for **human rights defenders** in general and for **environmental leaders** in particular.*

The sense of personal risk in response to activism is also experienced in the Philippines by Jhewoung Capatoy, who outlines how in trying to save lives, one’s own life can be put at risk:

I come from the Lamao Limay Bataan community, which is about three hours away from Manila. I decided to get involved because local communities are suffering as a result of the establishment of coal-fired power plants. People are suffering from health issues and are dying as a result of environmental disasters. And people who speak up against this are also getting killed. Being an activist is dangerous, but if no one speaks up and acts against this, the situation will become normalised. If we don’t fight against the system, things will continue to be the way they are: people will continue to die and the impacts of the climate crisis will become unbearable to our communities. Most likely, a lot more people will die.

Deep down, one reason why I’m doing this is that I have lost people who were very dear to me. I went through an experience that marked me for life when I was in first grade, about seven years old, in 2004. A flash flood killed two neighbours who were also my close friends. Flash floods were caused by the construction of an energy plant in the area. Later on, when I started high school, I got in touch with a youth organisation that worked to protect Mother Nature. I got involved because I didn’t want to lose anyone else. I had realised that my friends had been killed by a corporation that only cared about making money, and by our own government, which colluded with the corporations and allowed everything to happen. Together, corporations and government are too powerful and if nobody stood up against them, they would be able to kill whoever they want. If nobody fought for it, our community would likely be gone in the near future.

However, being an activist also meant that I would continue to lose people. Soon after I got involved one colleague, a well-known climate defender, Gloria Capitan, was killed. She led the fight against coal-fired power plants because the pollution caused by these corporations in her area were causing people serious respiratory problems and other issues. We believe that both the corporations we were protesting against and our local government are responsible for her killing. We know who shot Gloria Capitan, but the police did not listen. They tried to cover everything up and have the case dismissed.



Chilean activists spray walls with symbols and slogans against the privatisation of water. Credit: Guillermo Paulbar @Facebook

Chile's protests of 2019 ([see section](#)) produced a violent state response unprecedented in the three decades since the restoration of democracy. But Chile's environmental rights defenders and climate activists have long known what it is like to be targeted with tactics intended to silence them. **Rodrigo Mundaca** of the **Defence Movement for Access to Water, Land and Environmental Protection** describes the obstruction he has encountered in

the context of his struggle against privatised water interests in Chile, and the political-economic connections that benefit from the status quo:

Because of our strategy to give visibility to the conflict over water, several of our activists have been threatened with death.

Between 2012 and 2014, I was summoned 24 times by four different courts because I denounced a public official who had been Minister of the Interior under the first administration of President Michelle Bachelet (2006 to 2010). As well as being a leading Christian Democratic Party official, this person was a business owner who diverted water toward his properties to grow avocado and citrus. I reported this in 2012, during an interview with CNN, and that cost me 24 court appearances over two years. I was finally sentenced, first to five years in jail, which were then reduced to 540 days and then to 61, and finally our lawyers managed to put me on probation. I had to show up and sign on the first five days of each month. We also had to pay a fine.

*We have been attacked and threatened with death many times. In November, an investigation published on a news site revealed that we were being **targeted** by police intelligence surveillance. However, in response to an amparo appeal – a petition for basic rights – against the police, in February 2020 the Supreme Court issued a **ruling** that the surveillance to which we are subjected does not violate our constitutional rights. This is Chile in all of its filthy injustice.*

Government behaviour has always been the same, regardless of the political colour of the incumbent government. All governments have reached agreements to keep the private water model because it is business, and one that is highly profitable for the political class. When they leave their positions in government, former public officials go on to occupy positions in the boards of the companies that appropriate the water.

In Papua New Guinea, Jonathan Mesulam also describes challenges of state restriction and threats for people who work to hold climate-harming interests to account:

The media in Papua New Guinea is controlled by the state and they only publish stories that are good for the government. Sometimes our stories are not covered, and we end up publishing

them through social media. The right to the freedom of association in Papua New Guinea really depends on the kind of issues that are being addressed. On some very sensitive issues, the police will not allow people to organise and take part in protests. Our ability to carry on our work also depends on the kind of companies we are dealing with. Some companies have spent millions of Kina – the local currency – to stop environmental human rights defenders, and going against them is obviously risky.

In these different contexts, the challenges are remarkably similar, and they are enduring. Climate activists and environmental rights defenders are acting with tremendous courage, and they need all the solidarity that can be mobilised on their behalf, domestically and internationally.

A YEAR OF INTERNATIONAL-LEVEL ACTION —AND INACTION

One thing the world did not lack in 2019 was evidence that change is needed. International institutions played a key role in tracking the reality of climate change and analysing what needs to be done in the face of the crisis.

A **UN report** from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, released in May, provided evidence of the damaging impacts of declining biodiversity on economies, food security and health. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, **published** in October, predicted that the kind of extreme sea-level events – such as floods and storms – that used to happen once a century will occur at least once a year by 2050. A major international medical study, **published** in November, warned that children being born today will face unprecedented health risks over the course of their lives as a result of climate change. That same month, 11,000 scientists jointly **warned** that, without major social and economic transformation, people would face 'untold suffering' as a result of climate crisis.

The evidence just kept piling up. The Global Commission on Adaptation



Indigenous activists protest before a plenary session during COP 25 in Madrid, Spain. Credit: Pablo Blazquez Dominguez/Getty Images

Report, **published** in September, pointed to the lack of preparedness for climate change, and the water shortages, poverty and migration that climate change will cause, suggesting that at least 100 million more people will be driven into poverty by 2030, undoing the achievements of years of development efforts. The report raised the spectre of 'climate apartheid', in which the rich will essentially be able to insulate themselves from the impacts while everyone else will have no choice but to suffer.

Climate change is therefore profoundly a human rights issue, and the disruption it will bring will likely have a major impact on human rights. Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, **stated** that human rights might not survive the climate crisis, while UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet **described** climate change as the greatest-ever threat to human rights. She pointed to the situation of Indigenous people in the Amazon, rising climate-related conflicts and the attacks on and abuse of high-profile climate activists.

The impacts are already being felt: in August, the International Rescue Committee **reported** that over two million people faced severe hunger in

Somalia as a result of climate emergency. In November the World Food Programme **warned** that climate crisis was one of the drivers of an escalating humanitarian emergency in Burkina Faso that has displaced around half a million people and left many children malnourished.

Hurricane Dorian struck the Bahamas in September, leaving over 80 people dead and causing thousands to be left without shelter, food, water and essential medical help. It was the worst disaster in the country's history. Local and international civil society **struggled** to mount a response adequate to the scale of the devastation. As the hurricane progressed towards the USA, people scrambled to evacuate their homes in Florida, but even as they did so, many still **questioned** the reality of the climate crisis that had arrived at their door. Five of the 10 most severe Atlantic storms on record have **occurred** in the past five years, placing numerous small Caribbean islands on the frontline of climate crisis. People's lives and their most basic rights are being threatened today by a climate emergency that respects no borders.

But at the global level this alarming body of evidence from real life and from international expert report after report did not translate into action. The two big international climate change meetings of 2019 – September's Climate Action Summit and its related Youth Climate Summit, and December's Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 25) – failed to produce significant new commitments to action.

The lack of ambition in meeting outcomes was indicative of a lack of opportunities for civil society to have real influence. As this report's chapter on civil society engagement at the international level (*see section*) describes, civil society often has **little influence** over international processes, and its limited access sits in contrast with the privileged position afforded to the private sector; 2019 offered little that was different. For example, the Climate Action Summit was not the only show in town in New York in September: big oil companies **convened** their own invitation-only event at the same time, with state representatives among those invited, but not civil society.

Preparatory processes for international climate conferences were also hard for civil society to access. An important preparatory meeting for the

Climate Action Summit was **held** in the United Arab Emirates in July; the holding of the meeting in a country with closed civic space meant there was little opportunity for civil society, both from within and outside the country, to engage and attempt to influence decisions. And then many of those young people from global south countries who were invited to attend the summit in September did not receive an invitation with enough time to be able to get a US visa. CSOs only received notice that their registration had been approved less than a week before the summit, essentially limiting participation to larger and wealthier CSOs with an existing presence in New York, a growing problem with international meetings.

COP 25 preparatory processes were also frustrating for civil society. 2018's **Special Report** on Global Warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change outlined precisely how dangerous global warming of above 1.5 degrees would be and the radical steps needed to avoid it. Predictably, COP 24, held in 2018, failed to endorse the report. Any hopes that its important conclusions would be addressed at COP 25 were thwarted. In negotiations for COP 25, held in Bonn, Germany in June, several fossil fuel-dependent states **conspired** to keep the report off the agenda. Oil giant Saudi Arabia took the lead by simply refusing to allow any discussion. The final statement merely noted the report, leaving no path open for its scientifically robust findings to be considered in future negotiations. Saudi Arabia is another state with closed civic space where the government does not have to worry about people protesting and civil society trying to hold it to account over its decisions.

COP 25 took place in Spain in December, after its first host, Brazil, handed the meeting back under the climate-denying Bolsonaro administration, and its second host, Chile, declared it was unable to host it following widespread protests against economic inequality and injustice ([see section](#)). The change stymied extensive preparatory processes that Latin American civil society had engaged in to try to influence COP 25, as Rodrigo Meruvia of the Gaia Pacha Foundation in Bolivia describes:

We participated from the local level, training young people to take part in the international negotiation processes, mainly at the COP.

We started by recruiting in various institutions that work with young



UN Secretary-General António Guterres speaks with youth climate activists at the first-ever UN Youth Climate Summit. Credit: Stephanie Keith/Getty Images

people, and making a diagnosis to identify who were the ones who were ready and committed to addressing the issue of climate change, and then we made selections based on the issues we were working on. We gave workshops on topics ranging from the conceptual and technical approach to the issue of climate change, to the management of environmental projects, the characteristics of the negotiation process and strategies to participate, as well as workshops to improve people's ability to express themselves adequately at these events. It was a long process, but it yielded a very good results, because we already have leaders in the country's nine departments who are trained to participate in discussions and show the world the initiatives and projects that are being developed in Bolivia.

Unfortunately, the last-minute change of the venue for COP 25 deflated us, because we were well prepared and had a firm position that in the end we could not contribute to the event. This was the case not just for us in Bolivia, but more generally for Latin America, where something very big was being prepared to share in Chile. The change of location and the short notice with which it was decided created a big complication for us, financially and logistically. On top of this, for



Young activists raise their hands with a watchful eye painted on them as they sing onstage during COP 25. Credit: Pablo Blázquez Domínguez/Getty Images

us in Bolivia the consequences of recent socio-political conflicts also were an obstacle that prevented us from implementing our strategy before COP 25.

Without detracting from the work done by the countries and organisations that did participate, I think it ended up being a very improvised event, and if it had been held in Chile as planned, the results could have been a bit more significant and positive thanks to the presence and the participation of young people. For the first time, Bolivia was going to count on the participation of a group of young people recognised by the state, who were to carry out the mandate of a collective process developed in Bolivia's nine departments through four or five prior forums.

But we do not want to throw away the existing motivation and the accumulated work that we have done over approximately one and a half years, so we have continued to work to train young leaders. Our goal is to underpin the ability of young people to generate proposals and initiatives, both technically and politically, not only in their regions but also in international spaces.

We are trying to have a constructive attitude in the face of this setback, and we are taking advantage of the extra time we have to get ready. We already have these young people who are in a position to formulate demands and proposals wherever it might be necessary to do so – be it in the UK, where COP 26 will be held, or in any other international event if the opportunity arises.

Those from civil society who were able to take part in the relocated COP 25 travelled more in hope than expectation, and many were disappointed. Angered at the inadequacy of COP 25 negotiations, hundreds of people – among them many youth climate strikers – **occupied** the main plenary hall in protest, just hours after Greta Thunberg's speech. Like the school strikes and XR actions, it was an act born of desperation: an attempt to do something, anything, to convey the urgency of the action needed. For their protest they were thrown out by security officers and stripped of their conference passes, which were only **restored** after pleading by civil society.

“THE COP IS A FAIR OF VANITIES ATTENDED BY PRESIDENTS AND MINISTERS TO PROMISE THE WORLD WHAT THEY CANNOT FULFIL IN THEIR OWN COUNTRIES.”

RODRIGO MUNDACA, CHILE



Conference organisers seemed more concerned with sticking to polite procedural business as usual than acknowledging the urgency the climate crisis demands.

It was not the only attempt that week to convey the urgency of the message: **Minga Indígena** – the Indigenous peoples’ alternative to COP 25, seeking to promote Indigenous solutions to climate change – and XR worked together to install a boat as a roadblock at the entrance to the COP 25 venue. The protest organisers pointed out that two more Indigenous leaders had been killed in Brazil just as COP 25 was taking place. The gap between the realities of climate action on the ground and high-level conferencing was profound.

Other international organisations and forums were also lacking when it came to action on the climate crisis. In September a leak from the International Organization for Migration **suggested** that the international organisation was censoring itself, including on the likely impacts of climate change on migration, in order to avoid clashing with the US government, which provides around a quarter of its budget. Meanwhile the World Bank was **criticised** for failing to stop its funding of fossil fuel projects. In October a civil society coalition representing 112 organisations wrote to the World Bank, pointing out that its continued funding of fossil fuel projects contradicted its stated commitment of 2018 to increase its support of climate change action.

Facing such challenges, civil society continued to face the classic dilemma of whether to invest time and resources in trying to influence flawed international processes or to work independently of them. Civil society knows that despite our best efforts, we cannot avert climate crisis alone: climate change is a global emergency, which means international cooperation is needed to combat it. The response to the emergency needs strong international institutions and agreements that are adhered to; this can only happen if civil society has clear and high-quality space for engagement, where we can have influence and assert accountability. Present reality is far from this ideal.

Rodrigo Mundaca of Chile’s Defence Movement for Access to Water, Land and Environmental Protection summarises the position of many, criticising current COP processes but expressing the feeling that it is still probably better to engage than not:

I have a critical opinion of the COP. I think that in general it is a fair of vanities attended by many presidents, and many ministers of environment and agriculture, to promise the world what they cannot fulfil in their own countries. The main greenhouse gas-emitting countries have leaders who either deny climate change, or are talking the talk about climate change but don’t seem to have the intention to make any change in their country’s predatory economic behaviour. The countries that are most responsible for climate change and global warming are currently the main detractors of the COP.

“IT’S IRRATIONAL TO THINK THAT YOU CAN SAVE YOURSELF ALONE... YOU CANNOT EXPLOIT MINES IN POOR NATIONS AND THEN ORGANISE A NICE SUMMIT TO COME UP WITH RECOMMENDATIONS TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM YOU HAVE CREATED AND THAT YOU DO NOT HAVE ANY INTENTION TO IMPLEMENT.”

SHARIF JAMIL, BANGLADESH



However, the summits do offer a space for civil society, from where it is possible to challenge the powerful, speak up about the climate injustice that affects the entire planet and promote the construction of a new development model that is viable and economically competitive while also socially fairer and ecologically healthier. But for that we need new paradigms: we cannot continue to think that there are unlimited development prospects on a planet that has finite natural resources.

Sharif Jamil of BAPA in Bangladesh also describes precisely why international cooperation is important, and therefore why civil society is engaging in international processes, but sets out the challenges it encounters:

The situation is urgent because water is depleting and there are no shared protocols. So we have started efforts within civil society, with people-to-people communication. We are working on five countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India and Nepal – to manage the entire Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna basins together on the basis of equity and trust. These countries should come up with a treaty or some form of consensus to deal with the problem of melting Himalayan glaciers. Bangladesh is a water-scarce country as we get only 20 per cent of total water over half of the year from upstream during the lean period. When a neighbouring country blocks all the water, water bodies die, agriculture collapses and the economy is destroyed.

It’s irrational to think that you can save yourself alone. What you have to do to protect the planet from climate change is to keep fossil fuel underground. You cannot exploit mines in poor nations and then organise a nice summit to come up with recommendations to solve the problem you have created and that you do not have any intention to implement.

I have participated in many global talks. The problem with these forums is that sometimes good things are said, but actions do not match words.

A big problem is that many in the global community are ready to help people with adaptation, but no one is putting enough attention on mitigation. So we request help for Bangladesh not only regarding adaptation to climate change, but also for mitigation, to keep our forest, to protect the Sundarbans, to protect the water bodies. The truth is that if you don’t keep this place alive, the entire region will be in trouble.

Still, we are invited to these forums and we attend. The former BAPA general secretary was a member of the Bangladeshi government team for the climate negotiations at three successive sessions of the COP. We try to help our government in the negotiations, for instance by providing data and analysis. True, our government still needs to change its mindset and understand that

economic growth needs to be sustainable. Our government needs to conduct itself diplomatically while being firm in searching for funding for sustainable development.

*I took part in COP 25 in Madrid, and joined the European Union's **21st EU-NGO Human Rights Forum** in Brussels, Belgium, both in December. Discussions there revolved around building a fair environmental future.*

So yes, Bangladeshi people are the victims of climate change, which they face every day, but they are also protecting themselves with their own knowledge and capacity, and reaching out to the global community.

We support our government in international negotiations because Bangladesh is a poor nation and there are many things that our government is not in a position to do or decide by itself; we depend on developed nations in many respects. We understand that responsibility falls on our government when it comes to changing its mindset and becoming more inclusive in its decision-making processes, but it is the responsibility of the global community to come up with a holistic approach to deal with a global problem.

In Ghana, Perk Pomeyie describes a range of attempts to engage internationally against climate change:

In March, I helped bring together hundreds of grassroots activists from Ghana and activists from the International Youth Climate Movement from other parts of Africa, to campaign for climate justice and urgent climate action, during the UN Africa Climate Week. This high-profile conference was hosted in Accra and was attended by African governments, international organisations and business leaders. During this week, I coordinated a non-violent direct action training session for hundreds of young people, while leading a mass rally of about 300 activists to the summit venue to deliver a strong message to heads of governments, businesses and stakeholders of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to act on the climate emergency.

I consider this as an important achievement because as a grassroots activist in Ghana, this was the first time I gained a strong personal conviction that my work in the little corner of my community has a potential to cause change at the top, if supported with the right tools, capacity and resources.

But the reality is that for many of the local and grassroots initiatives that are doing essential community-level work, as described above, there is no route available to take their ideas into international arenas. It is not that they do not want to make those connections; rather, they struggle to access the opportunities to make their voices heard. In the Philippines, Jhewoung Capatoy of Young Bataeños Environmental Advocacy Network sets out these challenges and the need for international solidarity, backed by resources:

Our youth organisation has not been able to take part in any international gathering. We basically have no access to that kind of space. Our organisation is local and no one has yet given us the opportunity to be under the spotlight. It would have been good if we had been invited because that would have meant an opportunity for us to represent people at the grassroots level. It is important to advocate for the environment, but you also have to make sure that you are representing the people who are most vulnerable. It is not enough to be there just because you believe that the climate crisis is happening. People should represent the real experiences and those who are negatively impacted by climate change.

The very people who are suffering the most from the climate emergency should be given the opportunity to speak for themselves. They should be invited to these forums so they can tell the world about their experiences. Those forums are big and impersonal and it would be important for participants to hear the stories of the people who are living in the areas where climate change and dirty industries are having their strongest impact. They are the ones who can really tell what's happening, beyond what the media is covering, which is far from enough.

Taking part in global networks is very useful for us. For instance, we've asked young people from Taiwan, who were participating in the 2019 Climate Action Summit, to send letters to our national and local governments to urge them to stop giving permits for corporations to increase their operations. Our government has planned to authorise two dozen new coal-fired power plants by the year 2030, so we are asking young people from other countries who are better connected to put pressure on our government. Letters coming from outside the country would mean a lot because they would show that our stories are not staying inside the country, that people from the outside world are listening and reacting to the pain and the suffering of the people in the Philippines.

It would be an even bigger help if the international community could help us financially in order to continue with our work. As climate activists, working with the local communities that are directly affected by climate change is always a challenge. I have had to leave my comfort zone, drop out of school and be away from my family. I stay in a community where there is little internet access or transportation. I go to work kilometres away from my house, to organise people, to give them updates and reassure them that I am with them for real. I do it because people need someone they can lean on, someone they can trust their stories with, someone they feel could help them.

Until international climate processes can put such grassroots voices at their centre, empower them and mobilise support for them, they are never going to adequately reflect or respond to the reality of the climate crisis.

LOOKING AHEAD: A NEED TO CONNECT THE RESPONSES

Despite the barriers we face as civil society, we will continue to do everything we can to engage at the international level, not to provide local colour or ceremony, but because the urgency of the crisis compels civil society to take every opportunity to push for the radical action required. What is clear is that polite participation in international conference rooms will not be enough. Civil society will need to continue engaging across the spectrum, on all fronts simultaneously, to build awareness and mobilise momentum, bring people to the streets and focus pressure for change on the decision-makers who are still failing to do enough to combat the climate emergency. Civil society will need to continue to disrupt and make trouble until political and economic policymakers take the crisis seriously.

The scale of the crisis demands responses from us all, at all levels, from the local to the national to the global. What should be clear is that the driver of innovation on climate action is civil society, which is trying to make the most of international opportunities, mobilising at the national level to demand the prioritisation of climate action and offering a tremendous variety of local-level responses all over the world. At the moment the connections between different levels are not being made well enough: local-level responses may be scattered and patchy, and the lessons from them and the voices of people involved in them may not be carried through to and heard at other levels. But civil society must be acknowledged as a source of solutions. People protesting for climate action have often been accused by critics of indulging in protest but not having the answers, but nothing could be further from the truth: it is more that civil society's solutions are not being acknowledged, and the bigger structure of responses in which they should be located does not yet exist.

Even if civil society does everything we can to combat climate change, it will not be enough, because states, businesses and international institutions also need to do everything they can, and that is currently not happening. So far, lip service at best has been paid. This is why one of civil society's tools, among other initiatives, will continue to be that of protest, civil disobedience



People take part in the 'Feminism For Climate' march on International Women's Day in Warsaw, Poland, on 8 March 2020. Credit: Omar Marques/Getty Images

and non-violent direct action. Alongside our protests, we need to tell the stories of local-level response, and encourage everyone to adopt solutions that draw on and take forward the lessons of our pioneering, proven and ongoing responses to the climate crisis.

At the time of writing, climate activism, at least on the streets, has become becalmed, as many of our societies experience lockdown in response to the

global COVID-19 crisis. Climate strikes have shifted to the online sphere. But the climate action movement knows this interruption – which has caused the next COP meeting to be postponed – is only temporary, and the movement stands ready to reactivate itself, to insist that, when the world rebuilds in the wake of the pandemic, a greener world is possible. Civil society will insist that climate action and climate justice must form part of the recovery.



Climate march in Johannesburg, South Africa, September 2019. Credit: Amal Atrakouti