



#FridaysforFuture: The global protests against Climate Change

Rashmi B R

PhD scholar, School of Conflict and Security Studies, NIAS

The very evident changes in the climate has kindled the conscience of the civil society, particularly the youth to work towards a better, sustainable planet. The protest that began as a demand for the Swedish government to adopt policies complying with the Paris agreement, grew as a movement against the inaction over climate change. But, are climate change protests in consonance with the level of economic development in a country? This essay makes an attempt to look into this hypothesis.

Background

Climate change is one of those phenomena, which has its effects on all regions, people, biodiversity, indiscriminately. Whether it is the rise in sea level or melting of the ice or burning forests, climate change has its impact on every corner of the globe, more or less. Civil society has been realizing this in recent times. Though the scientists have been issuing warnings, for a long time, the larger section of the civil society and the policy making community were hibernating. With realization and fear of extinction seeping in, people have taken active role in taking part in issues of climate change.

Greta Thunberg, a school student who spearheaded the movement “Fridays for Future” in Sweden, inspired the youth and the civil society to fight for the cause. In August 2018, she began protesting in front of the Swedish Parliament, demanding effective climate policies and stronger climate action. Her slogan *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (school strike for climate) gained popularity among school students and the youth, who joined her in her protest. 2018 was also crucial because of Swedish General Election. Her protests helped in making climate change the most important election issue.

Under the banner of *Fridays for Future*, the school strikes spread across communities and students across Sweden and other parts of Europe. Prior to the United Nations Climate Action Summit, the movement had found place in different countries across Asia, Africa and the Americas. Greta became the poster child of the climate protests.

The United Nations and its agencies are leading the efforts of the globe towards combating climate change. In 2019, the United Nations Climate Action Summit, a dedicated platform to address various issues surrounding climate and environment was held. This is also the time when the civil society, particularly children and youth are under the limelight in international meetings and conferences focusing on climate change.

Causes, Concerns and Fallouts

Climate change is evident. Whether it is the global warming, polar vortex, devastating hurricanes, wild fires, floods, or sea level rise; the manifestations of climate change are showcasing the reality we live in and the kind of future we are passing on to the forthcoming generations.

Wild fires have ravaged Brazil, Indonesia and Australia and even some parts of the sub-Arctic region. High temperatures combined with dry winds are the main causes. However, in some cases, human-created disasters have proven extremely dangerous. The slash and burn technique in agriculture is believed to be the main cause of the wild fire in the Brazilian Amazon. The government is also accused of intentionally destroying vast swaths of forest land for the benefit of the corporates and in the name of economic development. The slash and burn technique is also extremely problematic in India. Annually used by the farmers of Haryana and Punjab, it is the reason for long-lasting smog across northern India. Undoubtedly, it also contributes to the carbon content in the atmosphere.

Floods and cyclones/hurricanes have also affected the population in coastal areas and near the river beds. Countries like India, Bangladesh are very vulnerable to floods that causes widespread damage. Frequent hurricanes (in the Atlantic Ocean) and Cyclones (in Indian Ocean) pose a grave challenge to the heavily populated coastal regions. Atlantic Ocean's hurricane Dorian is considered as the worst natural disaster in the history of the Bahamas. It caused destruction in its path along the eastern Coast of the United States and Canada. In South Asia, cyclones in the Arabian Sea caused floods in the southern states and western coast of India. The rise in sea level and warming waters are said to be the main causes of the frequency of hurricanes/cyclones.

Glaciers provide profound evidence regarding the extent of climate change. Though the melting of glaciers has been a gradual phenomenon since the end of Pleistocene (colloquially known as the ice age), the rate at which this has been occurring has increased during Anthropocene (an epoch where human action is capable of interfering and influencing the natural processes). On 19 August 2019, Iceland mourned the death of its glacier Okjökull. Led by Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, the Icelandic people commemorated the former glacier with a plaque. While there are monuments and memorials for major events and eminent personalities, the plaque is a monumental symbol for an environmental disaster.

The good part of climate change is that more and more people have begun recognizing its existence and the risks associated, despite the presence of strong climate-denial groups

and lobbies. Increasing awareness, which is the result of the efforts of scientists, scholars and international organizations, has contributed to a large extent.

Apart from awareness and education, the severity of the impact has been quite visible in the past decade. There is also a feeling of 'being a perpetrator'. More and more people now accept that human actions are responsible for the imbalance that is in place. Needless to mention, climate change affects the livelihoods to a large extent. Countries like Bangladesh and Maldives have repeatedly told the international community about the crisis they are facing and the possible mass migration of people from their territories. Though the term 'climate refugees' is not defined in exact words and is not widely accepted, it speaks volumes about the seriousness of climate change.

Responses: Civil society, Countries, Regions, International Organizations

The civil society, in the form of non-governmental organizations has raised its voice for the cause. Organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Greenpeace International, and Civil Society Coalition on Climate Change (CSCCC) have global presence and recognition. They do have a voice in policy decisions.

Climate change has been a very important election issue in the Scandinavian countries. However, since 2018, this is being expressed in a very unique manner. As mentioned earlier, *Fridays for Future* inspired many children and young people to stand up for the cause. The movement gained the attention thanks to the social media and the lobbyists who are backing children like Greta.

In September 2019, six million people worldwide joined the global protest for climate change. Organized by the FridaysForFuture Group, it is the biggest mobilization for climate issues. The main crux of the movement was to question the inaction of the policy makers and politicians. Thunberg resonates this, when she says that the world leaders have "betrayed" the young people and the future generations.

Countries are divided over the issue of climate change and its existence. The divide is also based on the level of development, the intensity of the impact, the level of responsibility and the direction of flow of resources.

Some countries are in the denial mode, striking down every effort towards achieving a sustainable future. This might be also due to the change in leadership. The United States and Brazil are classic examples. The Trump administration is firm on its stance against climate change and any initiative in that direction. Mike Pompeo's statement in the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting of 2019, refused to spell the phrase 'climate change'. The Finnish Chairmanship of the Council concluded without any concrete agreement. US's stance on the Paris Agreement is well known.

Brazil, a country that was in the forefront of the deliberations on climate change, and hosted a number of international summits, is obstructing many environment-friendly initiatives. Bolsonaro's government is charged of destroying the Amazon and using its resources for the benefit of the corporates. The administration is also guilty of not taking enough measures during a mysterious oil spill along the Brazilian coast.

The divide between the developed and developing countries is persistent since serious talks were held on climate change. The Kyoto Protocol was not acceptable to some developed countries due to the provisions that are "discriminatory". But the argument is that the developed countries experienced growth at the cost of the climate (beginning from the Industrial Revolution) and are now hampering the process of development in the developing countries. The argument gave rise to the slogan "Common but Differentiated Responsibilities" (CBDR). Though this concept is slowly dwindling, the developing countries including India long justified their non-environment friendly actions using CBDR.

The justification may have been pushed to back during the Paris Agreement talks, but it is a fact that the resources flow from the developed countries to the developing ones. Countries need monetary and other resources to combat the impact, and thus the developed countries automatically have more responsibility. This is the primary reason for some countries in the developed world, to turn away from issues of climate change.

Response to climate crisis also depends on the intensity. Some countries are more vulnerable to the impact than others. This vulnerability is often combined with the resources at the disposal of the country. Small island countries like Maldives or the Caribbean Islands or the Pacific Islands, are prone to high risk from rising sea levels, but they lack the resources to adapt, additionally, they also lack a strong voice in the international platforms.

In few cases, countries combine their interests and goals and take initiatives through regional organizations or by floating specific regional arrangements. Europe as a region seems to be more united in terms of climate change. The European Green Deal presented during the COP-25 Madrid is a roadmap for the EU countries to attain sustainable future. It proposes action plans to "boost the efficient use of resources by moving to a clean, circular economy; and restore biodiversity and cut pollution." By adhering to the action plan, the EU would be carbon neutral by 2050. Alongside, the EU also announced the proposal of implementing European 'Climate Law' and launch of the European Climate Pact. Europe is also concerned about the changes in the Arctic. The melting sea ice, changes in the natural cycles, biodiversity, nuclear accidents, marine pollution, and increased shipping have been the cause of concern. The civil society is quite proactive and places climate action as one of the primary demands during elections.

ASEAN, SAARC, BIMSTEC are few other regional organizations that have climate change as a part of their mandate.

At the global level, the United Nations and platforms such as the Conference of Parties have taken the lead. The UNFCCC has been at the forefront of holding summits at various countries and pushing them for climate action. In September 2019, the UN General Secretary called for the Climate Action Summit, bringing together representatives of governments, non-state actors, international organizations and business houses. Energy transition, nature-based solutions, industry transition, cities and local action, climate finance and carbon pricing, and resilience were the five key areas identified. However, like most of the summits, countries differed according to their determination to mitigate climate change. The Nordics and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) were the most determined and clearly indicated their action plan. On the extreme end, the UN vetoed the speeches of representatives of Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Australia, Japan, South Korea and United States.

The UN Secretary-General said that he wished to hear action-oriented announcements from all the stakeholders. Undoubtedly this is ambitious and far-fetched because mitigation efforts also imply a transformation of the economies. The governments are then expected not to create differences in terms of opportunities, be fair enough to solve economic inequalities and ensure that there are haves and have nots or winners or losers. As noble, the idea seems, it is not very easy for governments to achieve this feat. This is particularly apt in cases of developing countries where there is a juggle between economic growth and climate concerns.

Also, few countries would not be willing to transform their economies due to the plausible loss of revenue and the difficulty in finding alternatives. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is not very keen on giving up its status of being one of the largest crude oil producers of the world. Russia and the United States also fall in this category where they desire to exploit fossil fuels and export it.

The summit again observed the difference of approach between smaller states and big powers. Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the Nordic countries, Germany, France and the United Kingdom pronounced stronger measures, while the big economies did not seem to make a mark at the summit. Civil society, through climate protests, ensured that it is heard well. However, these protests and sloganeering were limited to a few countries, mostly the developed world. Therefore, there is another concern about how people in different strata of countries perceive climate change.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference, 2019 hosted COP-25 to the UNFCCC, CMP-15 to the Kyoto Protocol and the meeting of parties to the Paris Agreement. There was no consensus here either. Parties diverged on the issues of carbon market and carbon

credits. There was no uniformity in the views of the participants of the both the summits, very similar to all other climate-related summits. Nevertheless, it brought together all those states that had clear, viable, concrete plans to find solutions for this global problem. It provided a platform for youngsters like Greta Thunberg to express the concerns of their generation.

Major Trends

Global protests for climate action can be considered a social movement that is being led by the civil society. Though not uniform across the world, and sometimes hidden in the backdrop, it can definitely be considered as a social movement, as it has sustained over a long period of time. *Fridays For Future* is an important milestone in the movement. Four major trends can be identified in this milestone.

First, the role of youth and children is evident. They have an advantage in two aspects- one, the numbers and two, social media. There are around 3 billion people under the age of 25, two-fifths of the world population. Due to social media, mass mobilization has become a possibility. Therefore, mobilization of the young can act as a very efficient pressure point for the policy-making community. History says that major social movements across the world were started and were led by the young. The most recent example is that of Chile, where students protests for the rise in subway prices spiralled into a bigger issue, with the entire population protesting for better governance structure. This finally resulted in the Chilean administration to agree for bringing a new constitution, considering the aspirations of the people. With immense potential, the role of youth in climate protests can make a big difference. Second, climate protests are being held across countries of different strata. A profile of the countries where protests were held, would give a clear picture regarding this- Sweden, Ireland, Belgium, France, Germany and others in Europe; Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Senegal, Ghana and Uganda in Africa; India, Maldives, Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia in Asia; Australia and United States; Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico in Latin America. Third, undoubtedly, Greta is the making of a pro-environment lobby added with the power of media. The extent of penetration of social media and other forms of media have helped the climate strikes spread around the world. The tagline "*Fridays For Future*" is also the product of social media. Fourth, protestors while demanding climate action, have also demanded the declaration of "climate emergency". If not an outright declaration, which is an absurd demand at this stage, a recognition for the crisis would result in much positive action.

Forecasts in 2020

Fridays For Future is a civil society led initiative. This brings to a crucial question- does climate action require a bottom-up approach? Civil society bears the brunt of the impact

of climate change- it affects every individual, though the intensity might vary. Some communities are at a very crucial stage, where their livelihoods is completely dependent on the sustainability of planet's climate and environment. Climate change is not an issue that must be solved by the political elites. Certainly, the policies must be implemented, taking climate into consideration, but they must have primarily bottom-up approach. Individual actions can make a huge difference. In this regard, following are the four possibilities that might occur-

First, climate strikes can continue and expand further, in order to keep up the pressure on the political class. Second, due to increasing awareness, individuals might try to reduce the use of plastics, if not completely stop it. Some countries have banned the use of plastic, particularly, the single-use plastics that harm the environment. Third, reducing carbon footprint might be another increasing step resorted by the civil society. Anti-flying movement, popularly known as the "flight shaming" is a new trend adopted by environmental activists, to make people aware of their carbon footprint. Flying is the most carbon-intensive activity a person can do. Known as *flygskam* in Swedish, the trend is gaining popularity across Europe, particularly after Greta Thunberg sailed from to the United States from Sweden to attend the UN conference. Fourth, more people are now changing their food habits in accordance with the environment. It is well proven that vegetarianism and veganism contribute immensely to protecting and maintaining the climate. As meat consumption reduces, the forests that are cleared for animal farming and for growing crops to feed them, are saved. In fact, it is the single most effective method in mitigating climate change. The trend is now popular in the western world.

Fridays For Future began in the developed world. However, the movement for climate action is not limited to the Europe. Though the protests began in the developed countries, it is attracting the developing world, which is more vulnerable to the impact of climate change. while the developing countries lack resources to combat climate change, they are also extremely vulnerable to the disasters that follow. In the near future, we may witness more involvement of the developing countries, a more clear stance from both government and the civil society.

References

1. European Commission. (2019, October 12). A European Green Deal. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en
2. Merco Press. (2019, September 19). United Nations ban Brazil's speech on climate change. Retrieved March 26, 2020, from <https://en.mercopress.com/2019/09/19/united-nations-ban-brazil-s-speech-on-climate-change>
3. Parker, L. (2020, March 25). Greta wasn't the first to demand climate action. Meet more young activists. Retrieved March 24, 2020, from

- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2020/04/greta-thunberg-wasnt-the-first-to-demand-climate-action-meet-more-young-activists-feature/>
4. Petter, O. (2018, August 29). Veganism is “single biggest way” to reduce our environmental impact on planet, study finds. Retrieved March 26, 2020, from <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/veganism-environmental-impact-planet-reduced-plant-based-diet-humans-study-a8378631.html>
 5. Sandy, V. (2019, December 5). “The Amazon Is Completely Lawless”: The Rainforest After Bolsonaro’s First Year. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/world/americas/amazon-fires-bolsonaro-photos.html>
 6. Sengupta, S. (2019, May 7). United States Rattles Arctic Talks With a Sharp Warning to China and Russia. Retrieved March 23, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/climate/pompeo-arctic-china-russia.html>
 7. Taylor, M. (2019, September 27). Climate crisis: 6 million people join latest wave of global protests. Retrieved March 24, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/27/climate-crisis-6-million-people-join-latest-wave-of-worldwide-protests>
 8. Timperley, J. (2019, September 10). Why ‘flight shame’ is making people swap planes for trains. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190909-why-flight-shame-is-making-people-swap-planes-for-trains>