

## Berkeley Leadership Case Series

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### Greta Thunberg: The Voice of Our Planet

*“Over 1,000 students and adults sit alongside Greta on the last day of the school strike. Media and news reporters from several different countries gather around the crowd at Mynttorget Square.*

*Many people believe she has achieved more for the climate than most politicians and the mass media has done in years. But Greta seems to disagree. “Nothing has changed,” she says. “The emissions continue to increase and there is no change in sight.”*

*- Malena Ernman (Greta Thunberg’s mother)<sup>1</sup>*

At the age of 17, Greta Thunberg is one of the most powerful voices in the global movement addressing Earth’s climate crisis. Thunberg has successfully stepped up to create a call to action, reached a massive audience, and rallied support across multiple nations. Her activism and sudden rise to the world stage has earned her numerous honors as the youngest Time Person of the Year and two-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee. “The Greta Thunberg Effect”, as journalists have dubbed it, has compelled politicians and government officials to focus on climate change.

Despite her accolades, however, Thunberg believes there remains much to do before the planet is truly safe and healthy. “Our house is still on fire,” she warned earlier this year. Going forward, how can Thunberg scale her movement to deliver substantive policy change?

#### The Problem of Climate Change

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, scientists and researchers have attributed the exponential increase in global temperature (see Exhibit 1) to an increase in human activity. From the Industrial Revolution onwards, the world has experienced heightened carbon emission rates each year (see Exhibit 2), with key factors pointing to pollution, the burning of fossil fuels and oil, as well as deforestation.

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Exhibit 1: Evidence of Increasing Land Temperature since the 1800s (BBC, UC Berkeley)<sup>ii</sup>

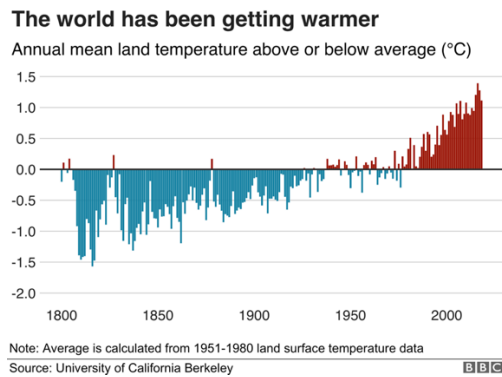
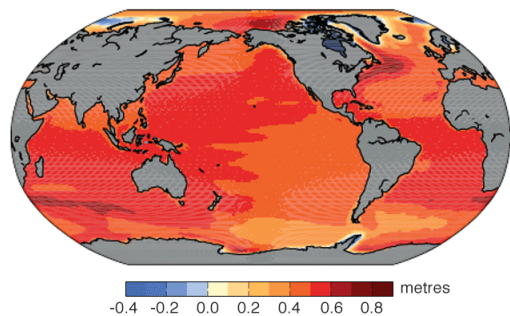


Exhibit 2: Evidence of Increasing Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide since the Industrial Revolution (NASA)



Exhibit 3: Forecasted change in sea levels by 2100 (BBC)  
**Forecast change in sea level**

By 2100 under a medium-low emissions scenario



Source: IPCC

BBC

According to the EPA, “scientific studies indicate that extreme weather events such as heat waves and large storms are likely to become more frequent or more intense with human-induced climate change.”<sup>iii</sup> The high rates of rising global temperature have also damaged ecosystems and caused rising sea levels (see Exhibit 3).

With the onus of solving climate challenges on world leaders, hours of debate by politicians have produced limited solutions or, at times, outright dismissal. For example, in Australia in 2019,

dozens of out-of-control bushfires blanketed Sydney in a smoky haze while parliamentary politicians debated non-climate issues for a full week.<sup>iv</sup>

Though world leaders did join together in 2016 to sign The Paris Agreement (see Exhibit 4), an international treaty on climate change within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, experts point out that having real accountability on climate remains tricky because modern governments (and politicians) rely upon the concept of jurisdiction. Think tank researchers note: “When we are able to establish jurisdiction we are able to establish rules, laws, and accountability for adherence to the law ... [but] in the absence of jurisdiction, everyone is accountable and therefore no one is accountable.”<sup>v</sup> Media report that in the years since the Paris Agreement, greenhouse gases emissions have shown little sign of slowing down, rising 4% higher with few new commitments to change from the world’s largest emitters.<sup>vi</sup>

Exhibit 4: International Leaders Stand for Paris Climate Agreement ([Presidencia de la Republica Mexicana via Flickr](#))



In May 2018, Greta Thunberg at 15 years of age, won a climate change essay competition in a local newspaper and began her local movement by protesting in front of the Swedish parliament, calling for the government to meet the carbon emissions target to which world leaders agreed in Paris.<sup>vii</sup>

## Thinking Differently: Coping with Early Challenges

*“Humans are social animals – we follow the stream. Since no one else behaves like climate change is a crisis, we see that and think that we should probably behave as they do. For me, I am on the autism spectrum and I don’t usually follow social coding. I go my own way.”<sup>viii</sup>*

*- Greta Thunberg*

Thunberg was born and raised in Stockholm, Sweden to parents with careers in the performing arts. In her early years, she was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder and selective mutism. Thunberg notes that she “basically only speaks when [she] thinks it is necessary.”<sup>ix</sup>

Thunberg’s mother, Malena Ernman, recalled when they first found out about Greta’s conditions. In late 2014, eleven-year-old Greta would spend her days in school and nights crying, sparking

alarm in her parents. Eventually, Greta stopped attending her extracurricular activities, socializing, and eating. Deeply concerned, Ernman cancelled all her performances and tried to find ways to get Greta to open up. Under pressure from her parents urging her to eat, Greta experienced her first panic attack -- yelling and screaming for minutes on end. At a loss, her parents met with various doctors and psychologists to diagnose the issue and received distressing emails from Greta's school, where her lack of attendance raised even more concerns with teachers.<sup>x</sup>

Through extensive household adaptations and parental monitoring, Greta's health conditions gradually came under control and she consciously decided to begin eating and speaking again. This early phase of her childhood proved extremely tough on Greta, particularly at school where she felt a sense of isolation and abandonment from her peers. Despite the circumstances, Greta's family made it an absolute priority to support her unconditionally through any obstacles.

Thunberg has openly discussed how her early challenges empowered her to think differently. She called her conditions her "superpower" and noted: "In this society, everyone thinks the same. It is a gift to be different. In a crisis, we need people who think outside the box. We need people who think differently and that means that people who work differently can be a good resource for that."<sup>xi</sup>

## Seeing Differently: A School Documentary

Thunberg recalled a pivotal moment at school that pushed her thinking on climate change. Her teacher showed the class a documentary on garbage dumps in oceans and their environmental impacts. Wiping away tears, Greta could not reconcile the truth of the environment with the amount of waste and pollution happening right in front of her. Her teachers flew in fuel-burning jets across the globe to attend weddings and fellow classmates chattered about shopping in cities around the world. Her mother remarked, "It was as if she could see our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions with her naked eye" and feel the terrible impact of pollution on the environment.<sup>xii</sup>

Thunberg said candidly, "For those of us who are on the spectrum, almost everything is black or white. If emissions have to stop, then we must stop them. To me, it is black or white. There are no gray areas when it comes to survival. Either we go on as a civilization or we don't. We have to change." She added, "You would think that the media or our leaders would be talking about nothing else, but they don't mention it."<sup>xiii</sup>

The lack of headlines on the climate crisis puzzled Greta. She wondered, "If it's really as serious as they are saying it is, why isn't it being discussed more or a higher priority? So, I started to read about it more and more and started to understand how acute it was and is."<sup>xiv</sup> She explained, "The more I read about it, the more I understood and once I fully understood it, I couldn't just look away anymore."

Thunberg first discussed her concerns at her family's dinner table. She pointed to her wealthy parents -- celebrities and artists -- who travelled around the world. She noted that everybody chases success, and being successful meant travelling in luxury and living in abundance. After one of her parent's trips, Greta delivered a stinging rebuke: "You just released 2.7 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>."<sup>xv</sup> For reference, she added, "that corresponds to the annual emissions of five people in Senegal." Since this exchange, Greta's family has given up flying, become vegan, and started upcycling materials.

What set Greta apart from her peers was her unrelenting drive for a solution to a pressing challenge affecting everyone. Teachers in her school would show documentaries depicting the horrific effects of pollution and global warming, yet when the period bell rang, other students

would move on to the next class, with the climate problem pushed to the back of their minds. This was simply unacceptable for Greta.

### Vision on a Board: School Strike for Climate (Skolstrejk för klimatet)

In the summer of 2018, Greta took her first steps as an activist. One morning, she took a white-trimmed wooden board with “Skolstrejk för klimatet” written on it (see Exhibit 5) along with sheets with information on the climate crisis to the Swedish Parliament.

Exhibit 5: Photos of Greta Thunberg’s School Strike ([The Local](#))



*Greta with her sign, reading 'School strike for the climate'. Photo: Catherine Edwards/The Local*

The sign was plain and simple. Black and White. School Strike for Climate. From the unaltered words of a young student wishing to see a positive change in the world, the message was crystal clear: take steps to fix our climate before it's too late.

What began as one person with a sign quickly snowballed to a global movement. At first, Greta literally stood alone in her efforts. Every day, she showed up with her black and white sign. During her three-week long strike outside the Swedish parliament, Thunberg demanded the government reduce emissions by 15% each year. Her mother documented Greta's solo start with a few simple social media posts:

“Outside the prime minister’s office, Greta stops and gets off her bicycle... [she] leans the sign against the greyish-red granite wall. Sets out her flyers. Settles down... She asks a passerby to take another picture with her phone and posts both pictures on social media. After a few minutes the first sharing on Twitter starts. The political scientist Staffan Lindberg retweets her post. Then come another two retweets. And a few more. The meteorologist Pär Holmgren. The singer-songwriter Stefan Sundström. After that, it accelerates. She has fewer than 20 followers on Instagram and not many more on Twitter. But that’s already changing.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Local news noticed and interviewed Thunberg on her efforts. Greta explained that her only power as a child was to raise attention by striking from school. She noted “we young people don't have the vote, but school is obligatory.” Striking gave her a way to make her voice heard.<sup>xvii</sup> “I thought



I would be sitting here by myself,” Greta admitted. Yet, day by day, families and children alike came and showed growing support for these strikes (see Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6: Photos of Greta Thunberg’s School Strike ([The Local](#))



A group of parents and their children who joined the protest. Photo: Catherine Edwards/The Local

## Building a Community around a North Star Vision

In addition to her own school strike, Greta coined and launched the *Fridays For Future* movement in 2018. This global movement encouraged students to skip school to demand action on climate change from their respective local governments. Three weeks into her strike, Greta spoke at the People’s Climate March in Stockholm – her first speech in front of nearly 2,000 participants. Harnessing the power of global social media, she began:

“Hi, my name is Greta. I am going to speak in English now. And I want you to take out your phones and film what I’m saying. Then you can post it on your social media.”<sup>xviii</sup>

She continued with a call to action:

“My name is Greta Thunberg and I am 15 years old. And I have schoolstriked for the climate for the last three weeks. Yesterday was the last day. But we will go on with the school strike. Every Friday, as from now, we will sit outside the Swedish parliament until Sweden is in line with the Paris agreement. I urge all of you to do the same. Sit outside your parliament or local government, wherever you are, until your country is on a safe pathway to a below-two-degree warming target. Time is much shorter than we think. Failure means disaster.”<sup>xix</sup>

Video and news of her protests went viral on social media and, by December 2018, more than 20,000 students around the world joined in support of her cause. By picking up traction in her local and surrounding communities as well as spurring movements globally, Thunberg created what *Time* magazine editors called a “global attitudinal shift, transforming millions of vague, middle-of-the-night anxieties into a worldwide movement calling for urgent change.”<sup>xx</sup>

Creating this much passion around a movement is a difficult task for a young teenager with selective mutism. Two factors likely contributed to her effectiveness. First, Greta’s steadfast

mentality and unyielding passion to see positive change drove her to show up – day after day – to protest government inaction and give media interviews despite her discomfort. Second, her clear vision paired with the power of social media inspired countless others throughout the globe to make their voices heard through the *Fridays For Future* movement.

Media reported on the break-neck growth of the movement. In May 2019, only a few months after the December protest, *Fridays For Future* protests drew participants from 130 countries; later in September 2019, Thunberg led kids and adults from 150 countries in a “Global Climate Strike” ahead of the UN Climate Action Summit. Throughout 2019, Thunberg honed her storytelling skills by speaking at protests in Europe and United States (see Exhibit 6). She also made headlines presenting her vision on a global stage at the United Nations and the World Economic Forum.<sup>xxi</sup>

Exhibit 6: Photos of Greta Thunberg at 2019 Climate Strike Protests in Berlin, Washington, DC and Bristol ([Vox](#), [Reuters](#), and [Time](#))





## Storytelling and One's Voice: Waking Up the World

*"How dare you...The world is waking up and change is coming, whether you like it or not."*

- Thunberg at the United Nations<sup>xxii</sup>

With these words, Thunberg accused global leaders of inaction while addressing the United Nations in 2019. She likewise did not mince her words challenging elite power brokers at the World Economic Forum at Davos<sup>xxiii</sup> to pay attention. Thunberg warned:

*"At Davos, people like to talk about success, but financial success has come with a price tag, and on the climate we have failed ... Either we prevent temperatures from rising above 1.5 degrees (Celsius), or we don't. Either we avoid chain reaction of unravelling ecosystems, or we don't. That's as black or white as it gets. Now we all have a choice: we can either create transformational action or continue with business as usual and fail... We need to give the next generation hope, but I don't want your hope. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I do. Every day. And want you to act. I want you to behave like our house is on fire. Because it is."*<sup>xxiv</sup>

Thunberg's passionate message drew attention to the rapidly deteriorating state of the environment and, with her youthful perspective for the future of our world, served as a stark call to action for world leaders. In 2019, *TIME* named Thunberg "Person of the Year"<sup>xxv</sup>, inducting her to a long list of influential leaders throughout history.

Spreading her message on a global stage, Greta drove home the need to truly reduce the global carbon emission rate saying "we must forget about net zero, we need *real* [emphasis added] zero."<sup>xxvi</sup> In 2020, she called for plans and policies that introduced radical emission cuts to meet the 1.5-degree commitments of the Paris agreement. With this North Star vision of a green future, Greta gained millions of followers. This community propelled her forward and elevated her as a leader and champion.

Oftentimes, individuals with years of experience lead organizations and communities. One could argue that the issue of climate change is one of the oldest challenges faced by humanity. That a teenage girl from Sweden is leading a movement across continents with her North Star vision to improve the global environment speaks to how Thunberg is effectively waking up the world.



## Sustaining Global Change: The Risks of Celebrity Movements

**I'm just an activist and we need more activists.”<sup>xxvii</sup>**

- Thunberg

Despite her awards, however, Thunberg told supporters that the global school strike had “achieved nothing” by the end of 2019. The strikes had “not translated into action” from governments and emissions continued to rise at a fast clip. Thunberg said bluntly:

“We can’t go on like this; it is not sustainable that children skip school and we don’t want to continue – we would love some action from the people in power. People are suffering and dying today. We can’t wait any longer.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Thunberg’s movement has reached an important inflection point in sustaining global change. According to researchers, movements typically fall into three categories: 1) the campaign wins and is successfully completed or made irrelevant, 2) the campaign does not win and runs out of steam permanently, or 3) the campaign temporarily runs out of steam but serves as a foundation for a later generation of activism.<sup>xxix</sup> While social media has recently helped movements bypass traditional modes of mobilization, researchers argue that collective action now is more transient; protest movements face the great challenge of capturing bursts of attention and fluid commitment and solidifying them into a stable “win” of change.

**Demonstrating Continued Personal Commitment.** Perhaps one of the greatest risks facing Thunberg’s initiatives is her personal celebrity. The movement runs the risk of petering out or not surviving if 1) the founder leaves or 2) the founder is discredited. On the first risk, Thunberg continues to actively and personally participate in her climate movement to ensure the continual emphasis on the world’s climate health. Speaking for “her generation,” she continues to press for immediate change. In 2020, Thunberg warned over 3,000 political and business leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos that “our house is still on fire” and publicly called for real zero emissions actions by all companies, banks, institutions, and governments.<sup>xxx</sup>

**Reframing the Movement Beyond Personal Celebrity.** On the second risk, various news reporters have regarded Greta as “a prophet,” but detractors have tried to discredit her as an over ambitious teenager propagating “climate alarmism” without the proper expertise or knowledge of science. A recent tweet sarcastically mocked the efforts of Thunberg, stating how she is “having a remarkable career already in that as a teenager she’s now a world-renowned infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist AND a leading scientific voice when it comes to global climate policy”, referencing her being on a CNN town hall panel.<sup>xxxi</sup> Thunberg responds to such criticism by broadening the movement beyond her personal involvement to include others like scientists. She states “I am not an expert; I am an activist. My message has always been to unite behind the science and listen to the experts.”<sup>xxxii</sup> However, comments sowing doubt about Greta’s leadership demonstrate a key risk with Thunberg being the face of the climate revolution.

Notably, a movement with a celebrity hero can also give space for the rise of an anti-hero. One of the most famous adversaries of Thunberg is Naomi Seibt, a 19-year old from Germany supported by a conservative American think tank, but better known as the anti-Greta.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Conservative organizations support the idea of *climate realism* and argue that overreaching environmental regulations have negative impacts. One institution, in particular, is funding Seibt to create a video series to bring additional attention to their cause. This effort to directly counter Thunberg’s appeal represents one of the ways certain groups are fighting back against large-scale climate improvement policies; more importantly, it represents some of the challenges Thunberg faces spreading her vision of a green future.

**Institutionalizing Work with Foundation and Broadening Community by Fundraising.** More recently, Thunberg has focused on sustaining the movement by growing it beyond herself. Importantly, she established the Greta Thunberg Foundation<sup>xxxiv</sup> to institutionalize her support of other climate organizations and movements. In 2019, Greta was one of four recipients of the Right Livelihood Award and donated the prize money via her foundation to various climate organizations around the world. Thunberg has also championed a number of smaller climate activist communities such as the Stop Ecocide Foundation and the SOS Amazonia Campaign, which take on various facets of the climate problem – from holding large corporations accountable for their waste and pollution to fighting deforestation of large rainforests. In September 2020, Thunberg received the Gulbenkian Prize for Humanity and donated the \$1.15 million award to smaller activist groups.

Since establishing the Greta Thunberg Foundation, Thunberg has also raised funds for organizations such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the solar power-focused NGO Solar Sister, as well as advocacy group Oil Change International<sup>xxxv</sup> and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020 by two Swedish legislators.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Looking at the work of Solar Sister in particular, one of their priorities is to increase clean energy access in rural villages across Africa. Thunberg, through her foundation, donated 50,000 euros<sup>xxxvii</sup> to this clean energy-focused group and underscored her support of clean technology to revolutionize the world's environmental and climate systems.

From her own movement for a greener planet, Greta Thunberg has inspired others with her voice and sustained this vision by building a global community.

## Scaling Up: Building a Machine for the Movement

North Star leaders are known to travel the road not taken. Thunberg chartered her own course through an unyielding passion to tackle the climate crisis and hold global leaders accountable for their actions. Using her youth and novel thought as a powerful tool for clarity, Greta has rallied millions of people in a call to action to better our planet. While she has made numerous strides in the right direction, there is still much left on her plan to truly deliver the vision of an environmentally healthy future.

**A Scalable Organization.** Media reports on explosive growth of movements are instructive. What happens, writes journalist Britt Peterson, when a “movement grows so much that it must pivot to becoming an office-space-occupying-salary-paying, benefits-offering operations?”<sup>xxxviii</sup> She cites other movement leaders like Kat Calvin, founder of Spread the Vote:

“The toughest thing for some of these leaders who are running major national organizations is that they started as activists. Now they’re expected to succeed in completely new roles—essentially, running a business. What they want to be doing is movement work and [to] be in the streets, but that’s not the job.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Thunberg took a small step towards institutionalizing her work with the Greta Thunberg Foundation. However, it remains unclear if Greta seeks to enlist experienced “Gold Star” executives, like the Time’s Up movement did by hiring Tina Tchen (Michelle Obama’s former Chief of Staff), to build a scalable organization and to push for long-term “wins” in policy and business outcomes.

**A Scalable Platform.** Early in 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Thunberg launched *Talks for Future*, as a digital initiative<sup>xl</sup> to continue the discussion around climate change and feature climate experts such as scientists, activists, and journalists to carry on the spirit of the climate strikes online. Despite school shutdowns across much of the world, young activists have still been

showing up for Thunberg's newest initiative, posting pictures of themselves holding up signs demanding action to protect the environment. Going forward, Thunberg will use her platform and influence to amplify the voice of scientists and policymakers to a global audience. Using technology as her medium, she plans to scale her reach and continue to rally groups behind the mission of a carbon zero future.

**Institutional Partnerships.** Thunberg could have outsized impact if she collaborated substantively with governments, like AIDS activist Bono did in 2002 when he persuaded U.S. President George W. Bush to launch the \$80 billion PEPFAR initiative (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief).<sup>xii</sup> To effectively partner with institutions, however, Thunberg would need to balance her "black and white" rhetoric with flexible outreach to those in power to find common ground. For example, Bono recounted his first meeting at the White House: "[President Bush] didn't want to see me, which is fair enough. Different political views and whatever. I was the guy who had to come into the office and get him to look up from his big oak table, there in the Oval Office, to let his values tell him what to do." A Bono-like flexibility could provide partnership opportunities to Thunberg, but also risks breaking trust and alienating followers devoted to her uncompromising approach.

Nobody could have predicted that a Swedish teenager would cause a paradigm shift in the way the world considers global climate change. With growing support from governments and organizations around the globe, the challenge ahead for Greta Thunberg's movement will be to capture and harness global attention into sustainable policies, technologies, and systems for a healthier world.

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