

Climate Activism and the Fridays for Future Movement: From Campaigning in Italy to the UN General Assembly



by Federica Gasbarro

My name is Federica Gasbarro, a 24-year-old Italian college student in Biological Sciences and a Fridays for Future (FFF) climate activist. My story began in February 2019, when I decided that I would not be telling my children that I had failed to act when there was still time to save our planet.

I never imagined this journey would lead me to the UN General Assembly in New York. Yet, I consider this as only the beginning. There is much work that remains to be done. Scientists have long been warning of the consequences of global warming, but their message has not been heard. They must be the drivers of change and us, as the new generations who will inherit this planet, their messengers.

I do not want to wait to become a scientist. Instead, I want to begin making an impact now.

We are growing up in the midst of a climate crisis and will need to deal with its implications for the rest of our lives. We must fight for our survival and our future. The melting of glaciers, rising sea levels and the consequent coastal emergencies, not to mention all the death and destruction caused by natural disasters, are the biggest dimensions of climate change that affected my decision to join this movement, embracing activism to make a positive change for our future. What we are facing is nothing less than an existential crisis, and yet we do not seem to be treating it as such.

Since joining FFF, I have worked and collaborated with many activists from all generations and professional backgrounds, meeting and connecting with individuals who share my passion for the environment and our future on this planet.

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In my city, Rome, I have led and organised strikes and campaigns to raise awareness about the environment every Friday since the FFF movement was formed in the winter of 2019. I actively participated in the Global Climate Strikes in the city and on Friday 19 April took part in the Italian demonstration in Piazza del Popolo with Greta Thunberg.

In May, I and other young activists from FFF in Europe launched the #climatechallenge hashtag on social media,¹ calling on other activists and followers to engage with citizens via the posting of videos calling for climate justice. The idea was to raise awareness and try to make our message viral. It received important traction online and internationally, being shared on the official social media profiles of the FFF movement around the world.

One of the most interesting dimensions of my experience as an activist, both with FFF and independently, has been the opportunity to visit many high schools in Rome, speaking with students and explaining, in a simple but scientific way, what climate change means and what we can do as individuals and collectively to help save the planet.

I have also taken my activism online, where I consider myself something of a "green influencer". Through my Instagram profile, where I have more than twenty thousand followers, I regularly speak out about climate

change, calling on my followers to spread the word and join the global effort.² With FFF, I have organised beach cleaning initiatives and other activities aimed at engaging citizens and the youth.

On 22 March, I met with Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the Italian Minister for the Environment, Sergio Costa. Months later, in June, I met with Virginia Raggi, the Mayor of Rome, to call for the issuing of a climate emergency declaration. I have also attended numerous conferences and events, including the Clean Air Dialogue in Turin on 4-5 June, organised by the Italian Ministry for the Environment.³

In July 2019, I saw a call to action by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. He wanted us to join him and other international activists, students, entrepreneurs and scholars for the Youth Climate Summit in New York on 21 September. Only one hundred seats were available. I knew there would be much competition, but I went ahead and applied, believing it too big an opportunity to miss.

Finally, on 15 August I received an email. Sender: The United Nations. I took a deep breath and read the email four times, just to make sure. It seemed crazy, but they had indeed chosen me. I was formally invited to New York for the Youth Summit, as a representative of Italian youth fighting for the environment.

¹ Federica Gasbarro, "Oggi [...] lanciamo una Challenge Fridays For Future!", in *Instagram*, 1 May 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bw7JxxrotfV>.

² [@federica_gasbarro]: https://www.instagram.com/federica_gasbarro.

³ BrennerLEC Life, *Clean Air Protocol*, June 2019, http://brennerlec.life/en_GB/cleanairdialogue.

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My first reaction was a mixture of fear and happiness. I felt a big sense of responsibility and I knew I had to convey the right message. I faced those days with determination and passion because I truly believe that young people need to be included and heard in discussions about the planet and our future.

I and another 99 young activists from all over the world gathered in New York for the summit, discussing amongst ourselves and with other guests and world leaders about the need for change and the best means to carry our message forward. This was truly an international dialogue, with us young people calling on leaders, challenging them to act now while reminding them of past inaction and its consequences.

My questions, like those of other activists, focussed on why world leaders have been so late to react to the climate emergency and why the issue is not treated as a real crisis. Climate change is a matter of human rights, a humanitarian emergency of global impact. People are being forced to leave their homes and countries due to global warming, a trend that is only expected to increase in the future.

If we do not change our way of life and political-economic habits, the day will come when we will no longer have fresh water. If temperatures continue rising, all the bacteria currently frozen in the polar ice caps will be released, contaminating our seas, irreparably harming entire ecosystems on which we as humans depend. This could lead to the spread of new diseases, which we are not prepared to tackle.

During my time in New York, I listened to the voices of many individuals who have already lost everything because of the effects of climate change. I particularly remember a man who told me he lost his home and a number of his family members due to the global warming emergency.

People and grownups tend to criticise our activism or rhetoric, describing us as exaggerated or excessively catastrophist. However, is it not a catastrophe if a child loses his mother and his home? Is it not a catastrophe if the very planet we inhabit is gradually coming undone and no longer capable of sustaining our way of life? Is it not a catastrophe if future generations, our children, will no longer enjoy the same wildlife or species with which we have become used to?

During those days of discussions in New York, we young activists worked hard and made the most of the many meetings and lectures. I again met Greta Thunberg, and we have since continued our dialogue. She asked me about the Roman FFF movement and what is being done in Italy more generally. When we parted, she reiterated her support: "don't give up" she said with a smile.

All of us are together facing an existential crisis. If we do not act now there will be no future for us. It is important that young people everywhere understand the nature of this crisis but also that each one of them can actively take part in the fight against climate change.

There are many ways to contribute and each individual can find his/her

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issue. What matters is that the youth are supported, not dismissed as overly pessimistic.

It is here that political leaders have an indispensable role and responsibility looking to the future.

Individuals can do much to help our struggle, but we are stronger together. Faced with transnational companies, the only means to have an impact is to increase our following, reaching a critical mass of individuals. Alone we cannot do much, but in accordance with market rules, if we reach a critical mass of consumers demanding change, these companies will be forced to modify their products and production cycles.

Overall, the most valuable policy recommendation is simply that of listening to science and the experts and act in accordance with their warnings. Enough with empty promises and declarations. What we need is concrete action. We require legislation that cuts state subsidies for fossil fuels, limit CO₂ emissions and aim to implement the Paris Accords in all its components.

With regard to FFF, the priorities of the Movement have remained unchanged since the first protests in 2019. This is due to the simple reality that no concrete reform has occurred. Those small steps that have been made are wholly insufficient to have a meaningful impact. Meanwhile the climate change emergency continues, as does its adverse impacts.

Looking to the future, in two or three years from now, my hope, my dream,

is that we will no longer need a FFF movement because our job will be done and our message heeded by governments, societies and the private sector alike. This may appear unlikely today, and the road ahead is still very long, but only this dream of a post-FFF world gives me hope in the future, as only then will it mean that the world has embraced change and begun to act to address the climate emergency.

There are many examples of small initiatives at the national or local level that deserve praise and international support. Our mission as activists and FFF members is that of inspiring new hope and action across generations, such that everyone feels he/she has a stake in the future and the movement.

Recent news that Italy has become the first country to introduce mandatory environmental classes for young students as a part of a wider civics curriculum is a welcome step.⁴ Yet, the global nature of the crisis and the years of inaction that have now passed make greater and universal actions more urgent than ever.

As a member of FFF Italy, I can only hope that our efforts can inspire more people, of all ages, to join the fight and together help save our planet for future generations.

22 January 2020

⁴ Kate Hodal, "Italy to Put Sustainability and Climate at Heart of Learning in Schools", in *The Guardian*, 6 November 2019, <https://gu.com/p/ck6be>.

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