

Including Young Voices in the Climate Conversation

By Lise Josefsen Hermann

Younger generations are the ones who will mostly face the consequences of climate change – and at the same time they have a great power to change how we are living on – and in harmony with – our planet. With that in mind, Danish journalist Lise Josefsen Hermann initiated a dialogue on climate change between three Danish high school students and Eduardo Queiroz Alves, Humboldt Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Alfred Wegener Institute (Germany). The three students are: Emil dos Santos Andersen (18) and Ida-Emilie Frosch Møller (18), Falkonergården high school in Copenhagen, and Emil Riisager Axelsen (19) from Aalborg Katedralskole.

Excerpt from the video dialogue with Danish high school students and Humboldt Postdoctoral Research Fellow Eduardo Queiroz Alves.



How much do you worry about climate change?

Emil dos Santos Andersen: “I am not really concerned about climate change because I don’t have much information, I guess.”

Ida-Emilie Frosch Møller: “I don’t know much but I *am* concerned – especially for the future of the next generation. I think about how we leave the world to them and about how we can achieve some progress for their sake.”

Emil Riisager Axelsen: “I am not concerned at all about climate change. I think someone else will take care of it. Also, during COVID-19 we saw pollution going down. I am only concerned about the mass production of meat. I am not a vegan and I do not think I will be for the sake of climate. Everybody will contribute in their own way to make the climate better for the future.”

Eduardo Queiroz Alves: “It is important to get informed by the right sources. Emil, you mentioned the production of meat, so you *do* understand things affecting the climate. Then you said, someone will do something about it. But, that is not happening, right? We are way delayed. We are not doing enough. I agree that individually we cannot do much, because it is a complex issue that has massive proportions, and that affects the whole planet. But if all of us act individually, then this will add up to something bigger. This can happen, as you said, if we reduce the intake of meat or drive more efficient cars. All of that helps. Also putting pressure on politicians. You seem confident that someone is going to do something about it. I think, we need to put pressure on them to do something about it. Yes, the COVID-crisis has reduced levels of pollution, but even if we stop emissions now, the climate crisis will continue for centuries. We are seeing improvements, people are changing behaviour because of the pandemic, but will this continue after COVID? Will people change their habits?”

Emil Riisager Axelsen: “I agree. Part of the problem is the mind set of people like me who just leave it to someone else. But then again, I am just a lazy teenager. I don’t think people will change after COVID, so we have to put pressure on the politicians; *they* are the ones who can really change the world for the better.”

Eduardo Queiroz Alves: “Are you more optimistic or pessimistic about what will happen in the future?”

Ida-Emilie Frosch Møller: “I think both politicians and citizens should demand more of each other. I agree that politicians can say something that people should do. But the people should also demand something of the politicians – it goes both ways. You cannot just say that the politicians should do something about it. Because it requires that everybody does something. Even we can make small changes that will help the bigger process”.

Emil dos Santos Andersen: “The problem is, it is not only the politicians and the people, the corporations are the bad guys in this. In that sense politicians must give them rules. We must put pressure on the politicians and the corporations – then we can make changes”.

Emil Riisager Axelsen: “I think I am more pessimistic. As you mention, no matter what – the climate will still change. And we have no way of fixing this, to stop global warming. So, in that sense I am more pessimistic about the future”.

Eduardo Queiroz Alves: “That is interesting because you started saying that you are not worried, and you are confident that someone is going to do something.”

Emil Riisager Axelsen: “I don’t think, that the world will end in my lifetime. I am not worried about what will happen while I am alive, but *I am* pessimistic about what comes after my life. My future children and their children”.

Emil dos Santos Andersen: “*That* is the problem, we young people, our parents and our grandparents don’t think about the consequences for ourselves, but we should think about the consequences for our children or grandchildren. When I talk with people about this usually the

answer is – but it doesn't affect me, because we are dead by then and we will not live to see the changes and I think that is the problem”.

What do we actually know about this climate crisis now and in the near future? Eduardo - Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

Eduardo Queiroz Alves: “I am not very optimistic. I am studying the contribution of permafrost thawing to a changing climate. When permafrost thaws, organic matter, then available for decomposition sets free methane, which gets to the atmosphere and that causes a feedback mechanism. That means there is a lot of methane and CO₂ in the atmosphere. It gets warmer and warmer – and we are making it worse because we are burning a lot of fossil fuels. It is really worrying and so dangerous because this mechanism increases the initial warming. My research is about how permafrost thawing happened in the past and how the earth and the climate responded to it. And it is happening again, because of us, because of human action. We see that it happened in the past so now we are trying to understand what the consequences of this are and how we can try to minimize the problem”.



Ida-Emilie Frosch Møller: “Do you think it is possible to avoid some of the consequences? Take action to stop it? Or do you think it is too late?”

Eduardo Queiroz Alves: “I think we can minimize it. Avoid the worst consequences. But it is impossible to avoid climate change because it is happening now. We can minimize our impact on the climate. It is interesting what you guys said about lots of people not worrying about climate change because they see it as a very distant thing – an issue for the future generation. But some vulnerable communities are experiencing climate change now”.

Emil dos Santos Andersen: “There are many small communities around the world, who are heavily impacted by climate change. But if the US or China, the biggest contaminators – if they don't change then the rest of the world can't really change the emissions of CO₂ and all that”.

Eduardo Queiroz Alves: How do you think scientists can engage with young people? What is the best way for scientists to communicate when it comes to climate change?”

Emil dos Santos Andersen: “There is a lot of fake news at the moment on many platforms. It must be through school. This is a really good way of talking directly to a scientist. You are just a normal person, who has views and done research. It seems much more reliable talking to you than reading an article”.

Eduardo Queiroz Alves: “So personal communication is better than writing something?”

Ida-Emilie Frosch Møller: “Yes, also because of the way you communicate. We can ask questions and you can ask us, make us reflect. We usually just read and then answer questions”.

Emil dos Santos Andersen: “Yeah, this is a casual conversation. I get more out of this than if I read about it in some schoolbook that my teacher gives me in class. And it feels really safe to talk to you. It is good to know there are also people actually working on this, climate change.”

How can we talk about this serious situation without people just getting depressed? How can we engage and make them want to act?

Ida-Emilie Frosch Møller: “You could include the readers and ask them questions before writing. It is good to include people you are educating in the subject you want to educate them about.”

Emil Riisager Axelsen: “How did we inspire people in the past? By pathos, logos, or ethos. People like Martin Luther King inspired many both black and white people to act in the 60s. We can do the same. Using hope as your main thing. Instead of saying: the world is so sad, you better feel ashamed, the world is ending. Instead say: hey, there is hope for the future. Try to do this and the future can get better. Try to advocate hope, so people don’t feel bad for what they are *not* doing but feel good for what they *are* doing, trying to make the world a better place.”

Emil dos Santos Andersen: “We have also seen Greta Thunberg being a central character of climate change. We need more people like her, frontrunners talking about climate change, so we don’t only hear about it from educated scientists like you Eduardo – or journalists – but we hear about it from everyday people, normal people like ourselves. Then we have a much better chance of actually improving and putting pressure on politicians all over the world.”

Lise Josefsen Hermann is a freelance journalist based in Latin America for more than a decade. She specializes in environmental issues and climate change, human rights, indigenous peoples, migration and more. She is a Pulitzer Grantee and her work has been published with media like Al Jazeera, BBC, Deutsche Welle, Danish Broadcasting Corporation, Danish Development Research Network, El País, New York Times, and Undark Magazine.

Eduardo Queiroz Alves specializes in the use of isotopic techniques for environmental and archaeological studies and with a long track record of publications in the field. He is presently based at the Alfred Wegener Institute, Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research (Germany), working in the Marine Geochemistry group as a Humboldt Postdoctoral Research Fellow.

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