

The Task of a Generation

By Jippe Witteveen, May 28, 2024

In 2022 my friend Johannes spent a couple of months surfing in West Africa. The waves in Togo, Ghana and Liberia were great. As a surfer you want to find spots without many other surfers, so this was paradise. But there was something else too. Local people told Johannes about subtle differences in their environment they had been noticing in recent years, which were affecting their lives. Phenomena such as a certain type of fish that did not seem to reach their shores anymore, or a drought which had affected their agricultural yields. Some people observed that the sea had been creeping closer to their homes over the years.

The term ‘climate change’ was rarely mentioned. People were naturally aware of the changes that were happening in their own areas, but did not necessarily know about the broader context in which these changes existed. To Johannes, this stood in stark contrast with what was going on back home in Europe. Back home pretty much everyone was familiar with the term climate change. But to many it was also an abstract and difficult concept to grasp. The direct consequences of climate change are not as visible yet in Germany and The Netherlands, when compared to West Africa.

Having a lot of time on his hands, Johannes started to delve into the research that had been done about climate change. He started to really connect with the information. The facts were crazy. Why wasn’t everyone talking about this? Johannes came to the realisation that the

future would not be bright like it had always been portrayed, if humanity was to keep going at the rate it was going. This bleak realisation at times made for a depressed state of mind.

Activism

At the same time, a sense of purpose grew inside. As Johannes got off the plane upon his return to Germany, he knew that he would not fly again. He had made the decision to devote himself to climate activism, and joined Extinction Rebellion in The Netherlands and Letzte Generation (Last Generation) in Germany. He had joined some ‘feel good’ protests before - holding up a sign and drinking a beer afterwards feeling good that you did it - but this was different. Johannes would now be doing things that were against the law, risking a criminal record and jeopardising career opportunities.

Letzte Generation emerged from a group of hunger strikers, who in front of the German parliament demanded to talk to candidates for the 2021 German federal election. Eventually the new German chancellor Olaf Scholz agreed to talk, granting the group publicity. But when it turned out that the new government was not going to do enough to slow down climate change and reach the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement, the group decided to change tactics: it would use civil disobedience to make the public aware of the severity of the problem and to apply pressure on politics. Similar groups had also emerged in other countries, one of them being Extinction Rebellion in The Netherlands, although the movement arguably became the largest in Germany.

Johannes' first act of civil disobedience was with Extinction Rebellion in late 2022, blocking the runway for private jets at Amsterdam Schiphol airport. As the group reached the tarmac the sun came out, which felt like a symbolic victory. Next in line were a series of road blockades with Letzte Generation in Berlin. Johannes joined his first 'sit-in' in December. A new tactic had emerged to prolong the time police needed to disperse the protesters: glueing your hands to the street. In December this meant that your hands would get so cold that you don't feel them anymore. Eventually the police would cut out a piece of street around the hands in order to overturn the blockade.



In 2022, these protests were still quite spontaneous and unorganised. In 2023, however, Letzte Generation started to get much more organised and started to think strategically. Something big was needed which would not only reach political elites in Berlin, but would also receive enough media coverage to reach the wider public. If civil society could get behind the cause, this would be a big step. This led to the ambitious plan to grind all of Berlin to a standstill for an extended period of time. In the end Johannes reckons that about 300 members of Letzte Generation managed to block most of the city centre for about 2 or 3 weeks. The effort was quite impressive

for the amount of people and was effective to an extent: there was a lot of media attention and the action ignited political discussion.

The flipside

The rationale behind organised civil disobedience was that through publicity a movement could be created that was too large to ignore. This was founded upon the idea that civil society was a rational actor. If more people would be made sufficiently aware of the science on climate change, more people would inevitably demand that radical political action be undertaken to avert a climate disaster. Initial reactions of disapproval during for example road blockades were to be expected, as they disturbed people's daily routines. But the expectation was that upon reflection, people would grasp the severity of the climate problem.

This did not happen. Once confronted, civil society did not acknowledge the problem, let alone sympathise with the climate activists. Rather, as Johannes put it, people "shot the messenger." Repression from the state was to be expected, as protesters would be breaking the law. But the reactions from ordinary people on the street were sometimes even violent. Sometimes Johannes and his companions feared that car drivers might drive over them. One time a guy jumped out of a car with a skiing mask, threatening to assault protesters. When protesters glued themselves to the street, the media portrayed this not as determination, but as stupidity. The dominant narrative did not become one of young people standing up for an important cause, but of criminals destroying streets.

Slowly Johannes started to get the feeling that this was going nowhere. There had been some successes - in The Netherlands subsidies on fossil fuel initiatives are now being phased out after Extinction Rebellion blocked the main highway to and from The Hague for about a month, to give an example - but broadly speaking the movement failed to generate mass support for its cause. At the same time, on a personal level, the negative reactions from people started to have an effect on Johannes. There were the tense situations in the streets, but also some people close to him had difficulty understanding why he was doing what he was doing, and did not want to hear about it.

Electric tuktuk

Johannes decided to change his approach. If activism was not the answer, then maybe there was something practical that Johannes could do himself to live in a carbon-neutral way. Something that might even inspire others to rethink how their habits might affect the climate. Ultimately big changes need to come from governments and corporations, but that cannot be an excuse to not also undertake bottom-up initiatives. The idea arose to convert an electric tuktuk into a campervan on three wheels, which Johannes could use to go on surf trips. Many people were sceptical about the plan, but one friend, who is a carpenter, was happy to help Johannes with the building process.

Johannes ordered the cheapest electric vehicle that had the possibility to be powered by solar panels. It was a Chinese tuktuk. Before the tuktuk arrived, Johannes had already made plans with it: he would drive it all the way to Ireland and meet

some friends there to go surfing together. This gave him a deadline; the tuktuk had to be a fully functioning campervan before the start of the trip. Soon, though, the first of a very long series of difficulties arose. The German customs at the port of Hamburg were not so sure about this shipment from China, delaying the delivery of the tuktuk for about a month and a half. To save time, Johannes and his companion decided to already start building the frame for the campervan despite not knowing the exact measurements. When the tuktuk finally arrived, there were less than 2 months until the ferry that was booked to the UK.



Everything about the building process was a big unknown. Everything had to be improvised. Johannes had to comply with a couple of regulations about weight and dimension, and the whole construction needed to be able to be taken off the tuktuk by hand, so officially it would be a vehicle carrying a load. Johannes spent days at the

hardware store lifting different materials to decide which was the lightest. In the end he used the same material that is used for billboards for the walls. It is cardboard-like with an aluminium layer on the sides. One time when I visited, we spent an afternoon working on the roof. It was to be made of plastic boards, glued together with what probably should have been a type of kit. Well, the next day we spent at the hardware store. The whole roof had to be redone, as the glue was of the wrong type and had become all nasty because of the moisture at night.

The battery of the tuktuk was not powerful enough. Johannes and his companion decided that they would replace it with something else which they were going to construct themselves. Don't ask me how you make a battery but it involves connecting a series of cells, in this case lithium cells. How to do this had to be figured out along the way. The instruction manuals of the tuktuk were in Chinese; the only help they could get was from a Facebook group with people that owned the same type of tuktuk. Johannes had to deal with burnt-through components due to high voltage, one device exploding in his hands, and not being able to know how much the battery was charged or how far he could drive with a fully charged battery.

These are just a couple of examples of problems that had to be overcome during the building process. Still, Johannes was the owner of an electric campervan on three wheels that could drive - be it only at 30 km/h - just on time to make it to the ferry in Calais. And so the drive began. Driving the tuktuk, however, was quite stressful. Although it had solar panels, Johannes still needed to charge it regularly

to make progress. Would he find a charging station on time? With 30 km/h there was already a discrepancy in speed on many byroads, but sometimes Johannes couldn't avoid roads where the other cars were going 100 km/h. Uphill, the tuktuk would have a hard time even making 15 km/h.

In France, disaster struck. Johannes had already passed by three charging stations that didn't work, and when he was about to enter the fourth one, one of the wheels hit the sidewalk. The construction he had built was much wider than the tuktuk himself, so by hitting the sidewalk the tuktuk simply tipped over. Johannes had to act really quickly to remove the water tank that started leaking in the front - placed there to balance out the weight of the back side of the construction - so the electrics wouldn't be damaged. A tow truck, ironically, took the tuktuk to something like a graveyard for cars. The next day Johannes drove off again, but later that day the tuktuk just simply broke down. The same guy with the same tow truck showed up again. Johannes told him he did not want to go back to the previous place, upon which the guy replied that there was no other place and told Johannes to just push the tuktuk. When Johannes started doing this, the guy pitied him and took him to a garage.



When at the garage they couldn't fix the tuktuk, Johannes had enough. He had the insurance company take the tuktuk back to Germany, while Johannes waited for his friends in France. They picked him up with their campervan (one with four wheels and a diesel engine) and went to Ireland together.

End of the story?

With the disappointment of the activism and the tuktuk out of order, one may ask, has Johannes' quest for a just treatment of the planet and its resources been a failure? I don't see it that way. I personally really admire his determination to find solutions for a big problem that humanity is facing. Climate change is undeniable and will have enormous consequences. To act as if nothing is happening, as many choose to do, to me seems greatly irresponsible to say the least. Not everyone has to go onto the streets or convert electric tuktuks (I might even advise you not to try the latter), but everyone has the ability to change small things in their daily routines, and those living in democracies have the opportunity to vote for parties that are willing to confront the problem we're dealing with. On its own this might seem insignificant, but collectively we have enormous power.

Waves of protest have often 'failed' throughout history. But even 'failed' movements have often paved the way for future ones to succeed. The level of concern for climate change has become much greater in recent years. Many young people share Johannes' determination to seek a future in which humanity can once again live in harmony with nature. This is promising. This is therefore not the end of the story. It is a piece of a larger process,

which hopefully will go down in history as rather slow but successful nonetheless.