

## From Darkness to Illumination: Climate Grief and Resilience in a Sea of Warnings

*Brief report for Climate-KIC's Deep Demonstration on "Forging Resilience"*

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It's getting scary: our global climate is changing, and humanity is not doing what's needed to properly address causes and consequences. If you are informed and sensitive, you confront an inescapable fact: unbearable suffering is coming. Some of our humanitarian colleagues are reporting unprecedented emotional distress, as well as thoughts of "giving up and letting go." We hear similar accounts from many other concerned people. *If not anticipated and addressed, psychosocial concerns can paralyze and demotivate the very same people who need to turn early warnings into early action. What next?*

The Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre is working with partners to explore the growing area of what has been labelled "Climate Grief" – among other terms. Broadly: depression, anxiety, mourning etc., over climate change. Given the evolving nature of language in this field, we are focusing not so much on the idea of *grief* (which evokes an already-occurred, clearly defined irreversible loss), but rather on the idea of *darkness* - which enables us to focus on context and future horizons.



"Whenever I want my mom to play fort, I just turn on news about climate change."

*Tom Toro/CartoonCollections.com*

### Our long-term goals:

- **Alleviate human suffering and promote wellbeing of key populations**, including communities at risk, humanitarian workers, researchers and journalists, climate activists, youth, and others confronting the risk of emotional 'darkness' linked to our changing climate)
- **Improve our collective ability to anticipate, diagnose, and provide proper support, harnessing the power of darkness to pursue illumination and transformative action.**

This report briefly outlines the innovative workshop on climate darkness piloted at the COP25 Development & Climate Days (Madrid, 8th December 2019), including the following facets:

- a) **Background and Set Up:** "Change is Coming" and "Face It!" activities (participatory art)
- b) **Introduction:** Innovative learning, incisive dialogues, emotions, humor
- c) **Activation:** Participatory activity on the emotional dimensions of shocks & trends
- d) **Science in Action:** The neuroscience of suffering, recovery, and resilience
- e) **Humanitarian Experiences:** Lessons from IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support
- f) **Group Work** (including participatory art-making)
- g) **Reactions:** News & social media
- h) **Next Steps:** Towards a proposal to understand and address climate darkness

a) **Background and Set Up:** Establishing a conducive atmosphere before the session

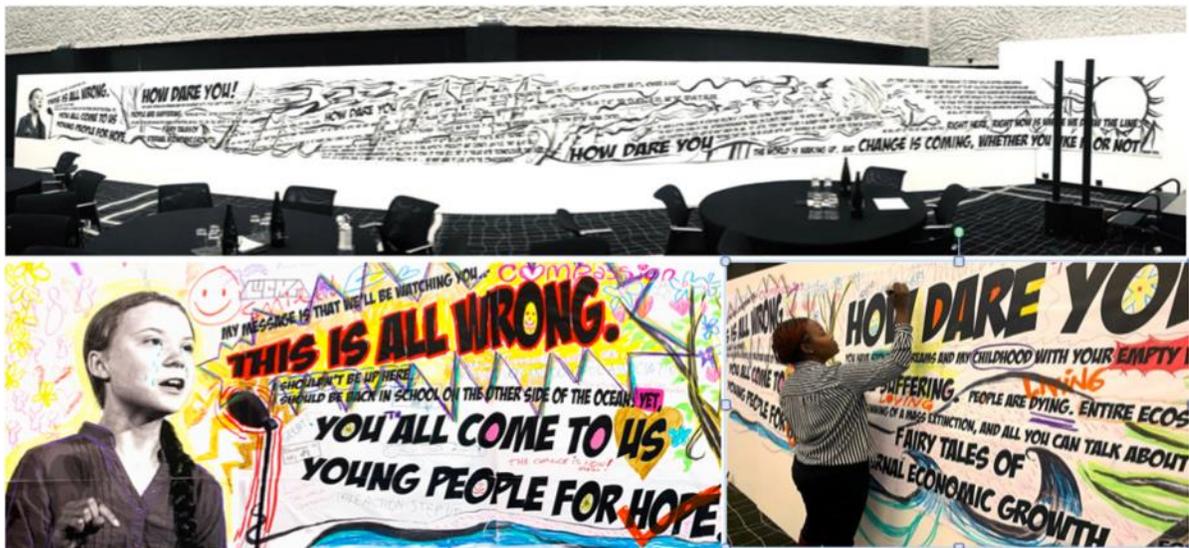
Managing climate risks requires anticipating what can go wrong, and doing something about it. Despite rapidly growing evidence about rising levels of anxiety and other manifestation of so-called “climate grief”, those dealing with climate change have yet to fully confront the scale of what’s coming. Indeed, climate-related processes and organizations seem deliberately devoid of any noticeable emotional texture, let alone depth. Are we burying our heads in the sand? Is the topic of mental health a taboo in the climate sector?

It is not easy to create space for difficult conversations about the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of climate darkness through our conventional communication approaches (such as publications and panels consisting of a sequence of powerpoint presentations followed by insufficient Q&A). How to enable and inspire a meaningful conversation about this matter?

In the “out of the box” tradition of the [Development & Climate Days](#) (D&C Days) held during the UNFCCC COP events, the Climate Centre co-developed and delivered an unconventional session entitled ‘*From Darkness to Illumination: Climate grief and resilience in a sea of warnings*’ (Madrid, 8th December 2019). Convened with [EIT Climate-KIC](#), the [IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support](#), and the [Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center](#), the session combined science, art and interaction to engage participants in a memorable, emotionally rich intellectual experience aimed at reflection for action. See [Tweet1](#).

Before the workshop started, the issue of darkness and illumination was interwoven in the preceding experience of D&C Days participants, chiefly through two immersive experiences:

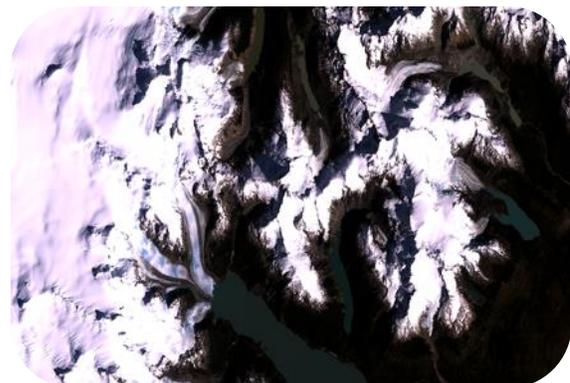
- “*Change is Coming*”: *Participatory Art*. Inspired by Greta Thunberg’s UN speech and co-created with Rebeka Ryvola, this 18-meter work of art combined Greta’s powerful presence and her incisive words (“This is all wrong” ~ “You come to us young people for hope? How dare you” ~ etc.) Starting with a black & white print as canvas, event participants were offered painting materials and invited to enhance the power of Greta’s message by adding color and visual content - actively expressing insights and emotions.



- *Face it! Participatory Satellite Art.* Inspired by Sunni Brown's "Face it!" activity and Santiago Espeche's artworks, this activity built on a phenomenon known as *Pareidolia*: our mind's propensity to 'see' faces and patterns that are not really there (as when seeing creatures in clouds or Rorschach inkblots). Here are two examples, resulting from rotating a satellite image of the southern coast of Rapa Nui / Easter Island (Chile). During the opening plenary of D&C Days, participants were offered large prints of Santiago Espeche's evocative satellite imagery, guided through the creative process of discovering faces, and invited to embark on an introspective journey to find and give a voice to those faces, ideally in poetic form. The resulting texts conveyed powerful feelings. While some had positive overtones ("*Blow these clouds away with your Ambition!*", *many others* expressed deep darkness and concern. Two examples below.



*Don't worry my love,  
These humans will  
Soon be gone  
We will be okay*



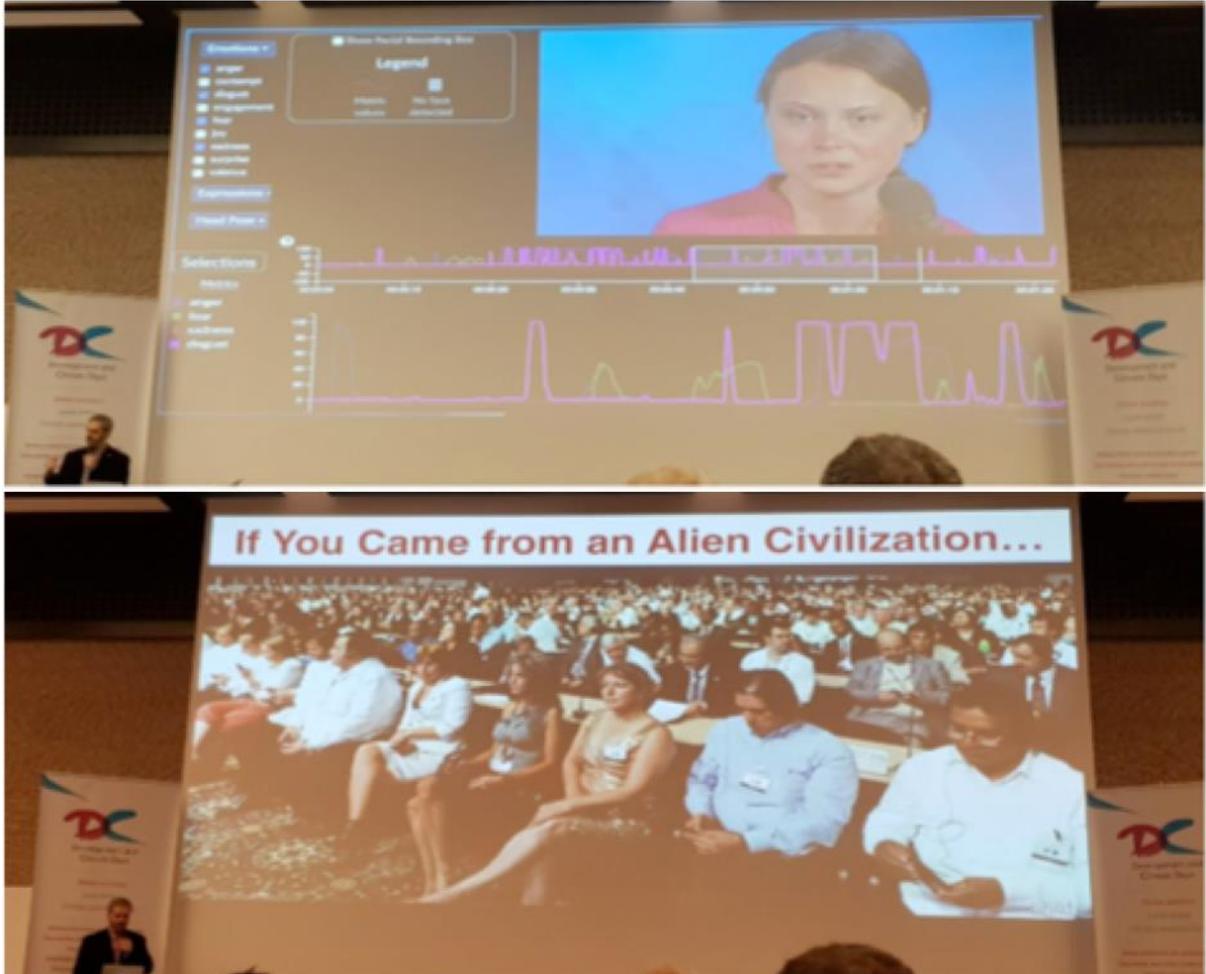
*Creepy darkness,  
where are we going?*

b) **Introduction:** Innovative learning, incisive dialogues

The facilitator welcomes participants and shares the deeply unconventional nature of what awaits – creating a safe space for what may emerge, including tears and confusion. See for example [Tweet2](#). Personal experiences of darkness were invited to emerge, starting with this photo taken by the facilitator when arriving to COP21 in Paris. Further reasons for concern were elicited and shared, including the prospects of geoengineering (i.e. deliberate manipulation of the global climate to moderate global warming, for example by blocking sunlight - injecting sulphuric particles in the stratosphere).



- c) **Activation:** Participatory activity on the emotional dimensions of shocks & trends  
 There is a remarkable contrast between the emotions emerging from concern youth (including Greta Thunberg’s UN speech) versus the absence of palpable emotions in climate negotiations and the mainstream communication of climate science.



Drawing from a tweet from a French meteorologist who ‘found’ Munch’s Scream in a map of extreme temperatures during the June 2019 heat wave, participants were invited to identify and share instances when art and culture awakened their emotional awareness on the



prospects of a changing climate. This moment, as well as all subsequent group activities, were enriched through the tailored design of evocative “soundscapes”: participants experienced an auditory environment conducive to reflection and conversation, thanks to musician [Ignacio “Nacho” Román](#) (also a member of the [IFRC Livelihoods Centre](#) and Spanish Red Cross).

d) **Science in action:** The neuroscience of suffering, recovery, and resilience

Participants experienced a decidedly unconventional [video presentation](#) by Peter Jin Hong, who among many other things is neuroscience advocate at Google. Drawing on what is known about how our brains process stimuli and construct meaning and emotions, participants occasionally burst into laughter while learning the complexities of how our brains work (including how they can be 'hacked' through a variety of means, from seeing photos of cute creatures to yawning). See [Tweet3](#) with participants' reactions.



Particular attention was given to how our neurotransmitters interact with the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC, our “compassion muscle”) in different contexts, suppressing or enhancing our ability to relate to each other, and with grief. Pain does not equal suffering; pain exists to tell us that ‘something is there’ that we should notice. When confronting the experience of suffering, whether due to cosmic forces or to climate change, we can turn grief into a source for action through empathy, compassion and gratitude.

e) **Humanitarian experiences:** Lessons from IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support

We were fortunate to count with the participation of Ea Suzanne Akasha, who shared insights and recommendations from her vast experience working in truly desperate contexts, ranging from war zones to the immediate aftermath of devastating earthquakes. Participants learned that violence levels increase dramatically in emergencies, and that the most important thing to know in instances of crisis is to ensure there's adequate psychosocial support. While engaged in a group activity with moving photos from her work, participants learned the principles for early interventions in humanitarian settings: *Safety, calming, self-and collective efficacy, connectedness and hope.*

## f) **Group work**

Participants self-organized in small groups based on shared interests, such as

- Connecting People with Themselves and with Others (with Scott Williams, *Climate-KIC*)
- How to Know, What to Do (facilitated by Ea Akasha)
- Harnessing Art & Culture to Pursue Illumination (facilitated by Rebeka Ryvola)

Importantly, group work at each table was enriched by an invitation to co-create visual art. Facilitated by local artist [Sara Gonzalez](#), participants encountered a large, transparent acrylic canvas, and intensely colourful painting materials and implements. During conversation, participants would partake in collective art making, adding a completely unique dimension to the reflection and interaction emerging from the group. See [Tweet4](#).



## g) Reactions: News & social media

In the context of their COP26 coverage, the Thomson Reuters Foundation published an article entitled [Tears flow as politicians fail to dispel 'climate darkness'](#). Authored by Megan Rowling, who attended our session and interviewed the Climate Centre twice, the article's title embraces our framing ('darkness' instead of 'grief'), and quotes us five times.



The screenshot shows the top of a news article from Thomson Reuters Foundation. The navigation bar includes links for Home, Women, Climate, Slavery, Property Rights, Humanitarian Crises, LGBT+, Food, and Social Innovation. The article title is "Tears flow as politicians fail to dispel 'climate darkness'". The author is Megan Rowling, with her Twitter handle @meganrowling and the Thomson Reuters Foundation affiliation. The date is Tuesday, 24 December 2019 06:00 GMT. On the left side, there are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Email. The main image shows a group of people, with a woman in the foreground looking down and another woman behind her, suggesting an emotional moment.



**Megan Rowling** ✓  
@meganrowling

"If people don't hear about it, and don't talk about it, and it only grows within, then that is a recipe for disaster," says [@PabloSurGames](#) of [@RCClimate](#) on spreading "[#climate darkness](#)" [#mentalhealth](#)

The organizing team of D&C Days is currently analysing survey responses from event participants; we will share highlights of survey results in an updated version of this report. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that participants who tweeted about the session highlighted that the space encouraged vulnerability and gratitude and included live music from and art (see [Tweet1](#)), and took away concrete lessons on how to understand and address the issue (see for example [Tweet2](#)).

## **h) Next Steps: Towards a proposal to understand and address climate darkness**

We are in conversation with partners to develop a proposal for submission to potential funders in early 2020, with the following structure:

### 1. Knowledge

*What is known about the psychosocial dimensions of climate change?*

*What are the key terms and definitions?*

- *Climate grief*
- *Eco Anxiety*
- *Other key terms*
- *Towards a working definition of 'climate darkness'*

*What are current knowledge gaps?*

*Are there proposed solutions?*

*What can we learn from other stressors? (from domestic violence to nuclear war)*

### 2. Stakeholders and Networks

*Who are the leading entities?*

- *Science*
- *Policy*
- *Practice*
- *Spirituality*
- *Innovation*

*What are the relevant policy processes?*

- *RC International Conference (resolutions on both climate and mental health)*

*What are the key networks, processes, and events?*

*Which are the key social media channels and voices?*

### 3. Understanding and supporting those most at risk of confronting climate darkness

*Identifying vulnerable groups*

- a) People and communities most at risk of climate impacts*
- b) Humanitarian workers and disaster managers*
- c) Researchers and journalists*
- d) Climate activists and community organizers*
- e) Youth*
- f) Other key vulnerable groups (to be identified)*

*Improving our collective ability to anticipate, diagnose, and provide proper support*

### 4. Art and culture

*How has art been used in the past to anticipate, understand and address darkness?*

*How are artists, museums, and other shapers of culture relating to climate darkness?*

*How can the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement harness the power of art for climate?*

### 5. From darkness to illumination

*Acknowledging hard truths while preventing paralysis and demotivation*

*Harnessing the power of darkness to pursue illumination and transformative action*