

**Saga and Bríet's speech at the Environmental Summit on October 20, 2017, hosted by the Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources.**

Bríet: Hello, I am Bríet (Saga: I am Saga) and we are third year students in Hamrahlíð College and we are here to talk to you about what kind of future we want. About a week ago our geology teacher asked us if we weren't willing to come to this summit and talk a little bit about the environment, so we've been sleepless these last few days over this and we will, yes, speak about the environment, but from our perspective, the perspective of young people or teenagers or whatever you call us (laughter).

The two of us participated in a project called I SEE this summer. It was held in Bologna in Italy for the first time, so it was really a kind of experiment, so it was really fun to take part in it. We were 8 from Iceland and then there were also 8 from Finland and 8 from Italy. We both have had a lot of interest in climate issues and it was this interest that got us to apply for the summer school, though a free trip to Italy also sounded good. (laughter)

The goal of the project was to teach students about climate change that is taking place in the world, the consequences of these changes and—most importantly—what we can do about them. In these five days that we were there we learned about the risks associated with the greenhouse effect, we got to know students from other countries who had a totally different perspective on the environment than we did and what made the project truly unique was that we got to do something, or we got to think about what we could actually do. That was really fun. We learned to stop thinking about everything that could go wrong, really think less about what could go wrong, and start to think about and in solutions.



(Group picture from the summer school)

That is the group, the kids, teachers and experts who participated in the summer school.

One question that came up for us in making this presentation for you was what actually was our perspective before we went on the trip? What was our perspective a few months ago? We realized that we knew really very little about the topic to even have formed a perspective. Yeah, we had heard about climate change a few times, maybe on television, you know, while we were waiting for the news to be done so we could watch „How I Met Your Mother“ or „Friends“, you know, while we were waiting to get the television from our parents. (laughter)

Do young people today look with optimistic or pessimistic eyes to the future of the environment? We asked a few of our friends at school and I have to tell you that it's really leaning to the darker side. The perspective of young people is often, we have found out, either that they know very little about it or they see little hope to be able to do something about it, that they could do something about it.

We just hear all the time: „You have to recycle, you have to take the bus or bike or walk to school.“ But they never hear about the outcome of these actions or why it's good to do them. You never hear, you know, what will happen if you do something, like what will happen that's so great when you take the bus.

If I'm going to be really honest with you, I was never really optimistic, I never looked to the future with optimism, I was always really scared when climate change came up. I felt so uncomfortable because somehow I felt like „Okay, I'm also, I'm part of the problem, it's my fault that the world is like this,“ so I did what most people today do, just didn't think about it, just looked right past it. But, to my defense, I really didn't know much about it then.

I never really learned about environmental problems until my first year in upper secondary school, which I find to be really not good enough, we feel this is not good enough. Environmental issues touch everyone in the world and especially young people all over the world because we are the ones who will take over from you. Young people will have to face these problems, young people are already dealing with them.

Saga: Yes, as Bríet said, education in school about environmental issues is not enough. We even remember when we were in geology in our first or second semester and our teacher told us she was going outside of the curriculum when she started to talk more about climate change. She did it anyway because she thought it was so important. There is though one course in MH dedicated to environmental issues, but it's an elective and it's not especially popular. (laughter)

I can also point to the reduction of upper secondary schooling from four years to three years as a factor in reducing opportunities for such courses because of time constraints students face now. But, yes, climate change was never really mentioned or even environmental issues generally in our primary schooling. But that is just our experience from what we were taught, hopefully it has increased a bit.

So, what we want to emphasize is that it is possible to combine teaching on the environment with general studies and in most subjects and for all age groups. It has to take priority to teach us about them so that we are able to face the issues when they come. Also, these things need to be discussed with young people in our society. It's not enough to teach about what climate change is, we have to increase creative work with ideas for solutions and teach in a positive way with hope.

I can also tell you that young people find it really sad to hear about some terrible problems with no realistic solutions. That is why you have to engage with young people and with everyone really about what is going on now. It's not nearly enough in the news except for some depressing stories but it is possible to cover so much more, for example, what kinds of projects are going on in Iceland now, what's going on and what's going well.

We feel that discourse and education are somewhat the responsibility of the government to support, change and improve. And we see too that it works, for example, with plastics and because of campaigns like „Plastic-free September“ and all the discourse that there has been about plastics, things have changed a lot! We see big changes like everyone using reusable bags and just recycling plastics.

So our question is, how do we raise the interest of young people in environmental issues and what can we do beyond recycling? It's a difficult question. First of all, with more education comes more interest. Nobody is born with a burning interest for something, you know, the more something is part of everyday life, the more interest people have in it and then they get used to it, especially if it's done in a positive way. It's like the more you hear a song, the more you like it. (laughter)

But it's also possible to do so much that's fun with environmental issues, like the project we took part in this summer and all kinds of events, go tree planting or restoring wetlands which is talked about a lot these days, or all kinds of ideas competitions like climathon which is coming soon. There is so much going on and a lot has happened but it is possible for example to advertise it a lot more.

And it's possible to communicate with young people, they know best what they like. More work with ideas for solutions could have really good outcomes and even the most ridiculous, radical ideas matter and could be revolutionary. Yes, it is obviously a collective effort, we have to work together for changes and those who have the power, the government, they have to take the initiative and think more about environmental issues and support the changes that are taking place.

Brít: We have a small question for you: What do you think Iceland will be like in 30 years? Part of our project in the I SEE summer school was to imagine where we will be and what the Earth will be like in the year 2030, and we did a final project combining everything we had learned that week in which we had to find a solution for some problem, one specific problem.

For example, we were together in a group because we wanted to solve the problem of how to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Our outcome was what most people think, too: electric cars. And we had to find a way to make that happen by 2030. So we had to think about how it would be possible to do that, and we found a way: ban fossil fuel vehicles by 2030. It was really fun and we were really proud of ourselves. Of course in the year 2030 I have become an expert in fossil fuels and Saga here will know all about batteries that can last hundreds of kilometers and with the help of the government, played by another member of our group, we managed to get the car market completely filled with electric cars so that nobody could use petroleum-based cars anymore.

But there was also another idea from another group to cover all the glaciers with aluminum foil which would reflect solar radiation and stop glacial melt. That was also a clever idea. (laughter) I'm not saying the solutions to the problems are so easy and just take a few hours, but for me, for us, it's exactly these ideas, these optimistic ideas, this optimistic thinking that will serve us well in the future.

Saga: And one example of such creative work with ideas that has already begun, and to show that we can all do something, I've started a petition to encourage the government to increase environmental education and creative work with ideas at all school levels, all the way from pre-school and up. I challenge the next Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources and the Minister for Culture and Education to work together in this project and of course to sign the petition and especially all of you in here also to sign the petition. This idea came to me yesterday (laughter) and we will be working on it over the next days, so, keep an eye on us!

Both: Thank you.