

Youth-Driven Climate Justice is Key to Achieving the Paris Goals



by Giulia Sofia Sarno

In 2020, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) warned that present trends are not sufficient to achieve the climate goals set out by the Paris Agreement in 2015. The Emissions Gap Report notes how the world is heading for a temperature increase in excess of 3°C by 2100, far beyond the 1.5°C Paris goal, leading to devastating consequences for people across the globe.¹

This raises an important question of intergenerational justice as youth and future generations are those that will bear the brunt of the climate crisis. Enhancing the inclusion of youth in

climate debates and decision-making processes is therefore fundamental, not least given their growing commitment to tackle the climate emergency. Through strikes, climate lawsuits and public awareness campaigns, youth are raising their voices to demand more ambitious climate action.

The impact of climate change is not equally distributed across the world's population. The most vulnerable in society often suffer the greatest consequences, despite holding the least responsibility for the unsustainable economic model that has led to the climate crisis. Rooted in the recognition of the profound inequalities that the climate emergency is generating, the concept of climate justice frames global climate change as a political, social

¹ UNEP, *Emissions Gap Report 2020*, December 2020, <https://www.unep.org/emissions-gap-report-2020>.

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and ethical issue and not as a strictly environmental one.²

Since its creation in 2018, the Fridays For Future movement has rapidly spread and climate strikes took place in 206 countries across the world. During the September 2019 Global Week for Future, an estimated six million people took part in climate strikes.³ In Europe, a recent Eurobarometer survey demonstrated how 67 per cent of young people believe protecting the environment and fighting climate change should top the EU's agenda.⁴

Young activists are demanding immediate and bold action from global leaders, promoting a vision for climate justice that acknowledges the interlinkages between racial, gender, poverty and climate issues.⁵ Building on the momentum created by the youth movement, Greta Thunberg was invited to speak at the UN Climate Action Summit, at COP25 in Madrid and at the European Parliament, while also being named Time magazine's Person of the Year in 2019.

² European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), *Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Climate Justice'*, 19 September 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017IE1144>.

³ Fridays for Future website: *Strike Statistics - List of Countries*, <https://fridaysforfuture.org/?p=1383>.

⁴ Eurobarometer, "How Do We Build a Stronger, More United Europe? The Views of Young People", in *Flash Eurobarometers*, No. 478 (April 2019), p. 8, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2224>.

⁵ See Xiye Bastida speech at the Leaders Summit on Climate. Anthony Blinken, "What a pleasure to introduce @xiyebastida of @fridays4future at the #LeadersClimateSummit today", in *Twitter*, 22 April 2021, <https://twitter.com/SecBlinken/status/1385261017169543177>.

Generally below the voting age, young activists are finding other powerful ways to make their voices heard. Resorting to legal means, youth across the world have begun to file lawsuits against national governments for climate inaction. One pivotal case is that of six young Portuguese who recently filed a lawsuit against 33 countries at the European Court of Human Rights. They claim that insufficient action on the climate emergency is in breach of Article 14 of the EU Convention on Human Rights that protects against discriminations, arguing that young generations will disproportionately suffer from the consequences of climate change.⁶

In 2021, young activists also achieved a ground-breaking verdict when the German Constitutional Court declared the country's climate law partly unconstitutional and ordered its revision as it placed excessive burden on future generations, violating their fundamental rights.⁷ Young environmental activists also participated in the recent landmark case against Shell in the Netherlands, which led to the first ruling obliging an international company to cut their emissions to comply with the Paris agreement.⁸

⁶ Matthew Taylor et al., "The Young People Taking Their Countries to Court Over Climate Inaction", in *The Guardian*, 7 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/gyvxxm>.

⁷ Thomas Escritt, "Germany Must Tighten Climate Law to Protect Young People's Future, Court Rules", in *Reuters*, 29 April 2021, <https://reut.rs/3eUIzO3>.

⁸ Roger Harrabin, "Shell: Netherlands Court Orders Oil Giant to Cut Emissions", in *BBC News*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57257982>.

These cases build upon a solid legal grounding. The right to have access to information, seek justice and participate in decision-making on environmental matters is recognised by the Aarhus Convention, a legally binding instrument that is particularly relevant for the most vulnerable groups, such as youth, women and indigenous people.⁹ Moreover, Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), the bedrock of international environmental protection and sustainable development, states that environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens. Principle 21 further states that “the creativity, ideals and courage of the youth of the world should be mobilized to forge a global partnership in order to achieve sustainable development and ensure a better future for all”.¹⁰

The post-pandemic context adds another dimension and urgency to youth engagement and intergenerational justice. Governments have endorsed the objective of building back better and in many cases specific reference is made to securing a prosperous future for young generations. This means first and foremost pursuing a low-carbon recovery.

For instance, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi stated that youth will be at the core of the country’s recovery

⁹ Text available in the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) website: <http://unece.org/node/4307>.

¹⁰ Text available in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) website: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1709riodeclarationeng.pdf>.

plan. Yet, youth activists in Italy have criticised the plan, arguing that it does not go far enough to tackle the climate emergency.¹¹ At the European level, the centrality of young people is engraved in the name chosen for the EU Recovery Plan: “Next Generation EU”, for which minimum expenditure benchmarks of 37 per cent for climate and the “do not-harm” principle for the environment were adopted.¹² Despite promising commitments, recent data shows that we may not be heading in the right direction. Since the beginning of the pandemic, G7 countries have committed 189 billion US dollars in support of fossil fuels, 40 billion US dollars more than investments in renewables.¹³

In this watershed moment, better inclusion of young people is urgent and active political participation can enhance their engagement. Several countries are in fact discussing extending voting rights to younger citizens. In the EU, some countries have already lowered the voting age to 16 or

¹¹ Angela Giuffrida, “Italian Climate Activists Sue Government Over Inaction”, in *The Guardian*, 5 June 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/hkdx>.

¹² European Commission, *Commission Notice Technical Guidance on the Application of “Do No Significant Harm” under the Recovery and Resilience Facility Regulation (C/2021/1054)*, 18 February 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/c2021_1054_en.pdf.

¹³ Data includes monetary and fiscal policies in response to the crisis from January 2020 to March 2021. Lucile Dufour et al., *Cleaning Up Their Act? G7 Fossil Fuel Investments in a Time of Green Recovery*, Teddington, Tearfund, 2021, <https://www.tearfund.org/g7recovery>; Oliver Milman, “António Guterres on the Climate Crisis: ‘We Are Coming to a Point of No Return’”, in *The Guardian*, 11 June 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/hm5b9>.

17 for local or national elections. These include Austria, Malta, Greece, Scotland and some German states, while debates are ongoing in other countries such as Italy, Ireland and the UK. Lowering the voting age could contribute to strengthening climate action, as argued by a recent study by the Institute for Public Policy Research.¹⁴

The positive impact that youth participation can have on increasing climate ambition is confirmed by recent EU data. Following the 2019 EU elections, 45 per cent of young voters indicated combating climate change as a main motivation to vote – significantly higher than older generations.¹⁵ In the same EU elections, the success achieved by the German Greens was driven by young people: among the under-30s the party received 33 per cent of votes, compared to 9 per cent among over-70 voters.¹⁶ A late 2020 Eurobarometer survey confirms the overall trend showing that young people are the most likely age group to indicate climate change as a major challenge for the EU.¹⁷

¹⁴ Laurie Laybourn-Langton, Joshua Emden, and Lesley Rankin, "Inheriting the Earth?", in *IPPR Discussion Papers*, No. 2 (September 2019), <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/inheriting-the-earth>.

¹⁵ Julien Zalc, Nicolas Becuwe and Alexandrina Buruiian, "The 2019 Post-Electoral Survey. Have European Elections Entered a New Dimension?", in *European Parliament Eurobarometer Surveys*, No. 91.5 (September 2019), p. 56, <https://op.europa.eu/s/pj3u>.

¹⁶ Tom Allison, "EU Election: Germany's Youth Wield Their Political Power", in *Deutsche Welle*, 27 May 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3JDxN>.

¹⁷ Eurobarometer, "Future of Europe", in *Special Eurobarometers*, No. 500 (March 2021), p. 101, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2256>.

The need to include civil society, and in particular young people, in climate debates is increasingly recognised. In the EU, the implementation of the Green Deal, the new growth strategy decoupled from fossil fuels and aimed at reaching climate neutrality by 2050, is supported by two instruments promoting climate justice and civil society participation with specific references to youth engagement, the Just Transition Mechanism and the European Climate Pact.

Moreover, the recently launched Conference on the Future of Europe, could represent a key opportunity for European youth to shape a more ambitious climate agenda, while demonstrating that democratic participation and climate action can be mutually reinforcing processes, particularly when youth are involved.

Growing momentum for youth participation in climate debates is visible also in other contexts. This year, the Milan pre-COP26 summit will be preceded by the "Youth4Climate: Driving Ambition" (28–30 September), a historic event that will bring 400 young people aged between 18 and 29 from 197 countries to Milan to develop concrete proposals on climate issues and discuss them with ministers participating in the pre-COP26 Summit.

This is an important opportunity to bring the direct testimony of youth living in climate vulnerable developing countries. Due to their age and geographical location, youth from these regions will be among the most exposed to the severe effects of climate change and therefore their participation



is an important step to address climate justice in the policymaking process.

The G20 is also working on youth participation through the G20 youth engagement group (Youth20) that will develop proposals to shape the agenda of the Italian G20 Presidency.¹⁸ Including countries beyond the G20 in the Youth20 would be a significant positive step. This would also address the legitimacy concerns and calls for enhanced civil society participation that were raised following the increased influence of the G20 on underrepresented developing countries, namely with regards to Africa.¹⁹

In a further proposal, advanced through a Joint Civil Society Statement, G20 Education Ministers were urged to prioritise quality climate education. Research has shown that without climate literacy the global net-zero 2050 goal will be almost impossible to achieve.²⁰ Education and knowledge are essential to inform activism and to help youth grasp the challenges at hand and necessary sequencing of policies to achieve results. Italy is well positioned in this regard, as in 2019 it became the first country to make climate a compulsory subject in state

schools.²¹

Actively endorsing these objectives would constitute an important success for the Italian G20 Presidency. It would demonstrate concrete commitment to strengthen the foundation of youth engagement in climate action and acknowledge its importance to achieve a fair and timely transition to net zero emissions.

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¹⁸ See Youth 20 (Y20), *Y20 Kick-Off Meeting*, 29 April 2021, <https://www.y20italy.it>.

¹⁹ Chloe Teevan et al., *A New Multilateralism for the Post-COVID World: What Role for the EU-Africa Partnership?*, European Think-Tanks Group (ETTG), April 2021, <https://wp.me/p9qfAP-Wn>.

²⁰ Education International, *G20 Education Ministers Urged to Back Quality Climate Education*, 3 June 2021, <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/24992>.

²¹ Kate Hodal, "Italy to Put Sustainability and Climate at Heart of Learning in Schools", in *The Guardian*, 6 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/ck6be>.

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