



It's Our Future: Invite us to the table

Youth participation for climate justice

We are in the midst of a climate crisis. Those living at the frontlines of climate change are already facing its impacts, such as increasing water scarcity, declining food security and progressively severe natural disasters and disease risks. However, people facing these adversities, often have contributed the least to the current state of affairs. Youth in particular, are and will be unequally impacted and are concerned about the unprecedented threats posed to their futures. However, they are the ones excluded from the decision making process, which leaves the majority of the world's demographic unheard.

In this position paper we introduce principles of constructive youth participation and propose ways to implement this in policy for climate justice. At the end of this paper, the most important points are summarised.

Not only do young people have a moral right to participate in the climate debate, their participation also provides an opportunity for governments of all levels. Youth participation helps to address sustainable development in its interdependent economic, social and environmental dimensions. It can help answer questions, such as: "What kind of jobs do we want? How do we want to live? How do we best mitigate and adapt to climate change, to realise this future?"

The We Are Tomorrow Global Partnership (WAT-GP) is a youth-led international organisation that seeks to empower young people around the world to realise meaningful participation on a national and international level. By collaborating and sharing knowledge with partner organisations from 11 countries, we have created a common understanding on the global youth's priorities and demands. This allows us to easily connect with youth organisations across the globe and consolidate their strength into a global voice, as represented in this position paper and the soon to be published Global Youth Climate Agenda.

Principles of climate justice and youth participation

Both the concepts of climate justice and youth participation know a wide variety of definitions. The paragraph below states our interpretation as we feel is most constructive and useful in the international climate debate.

Climate Justice

Effects of climate change, environmental degradation and the associated costs are not and will not be felt by all people equally. We can already see how climate change exacerbates existing inequalities within our societies, meaning that underprivileged people, such as youth, will be disproportionately affected. Climate justice seeks to address these inequities and informs us on how we should act to combat climate change in solidarity¹. This adds a moral component to the question of 'what needs to be done' in terms of climate action.

For the purpose of representing global youth in the international climate debate, WAT-GP mainly focuses on the geographical and intergenerational aspects of climate justice, asking youth from various backgrounds: "What do you need to realise a sustainable future in your country?". Here, race, gender and other minority considerations are often central to the solutions, depending on the geographical context concerned.

Youth Participation

To address climate justice issues through an intergenerational lens, we ought to involve those who will bear the brunt of the consequences in the future: youth². Participation of youth promotes their leadership and structural engagement in decision-making processes³. It recognizes that decisions made today will affect them in the future; therefore, they must be considered as a key ally and the head of the global climate movement.

WAT-GP understands valuable youth participation to revolve around the representation of a constituency. This means that youth should have the space and tools to organise themselves and develop a shared vision. However, such efforts come with large responsibilities that are often taken on voluntarily - next to studies or starting a career. This puts youth and youth organisations in a disadvantaged position as compared to other advocacy groups. It is for this

¹ According to UNEP (2022), climate justice is "a term used for framing global warming as an ethical and political issue, rather than one that is purely environmental or physical in nature. This is done by relating the effects of climate change to concepts of justice, particularly environmental justice and social justice and by examining issues such as equality, human rights, collective rights, and the historical responsibilities for climate."

² Here, we define youth as being between 16 and 32 years

³ Youth participation is defined as "Participation is when young people collaborate with adult decision makers to share their views and inputs (e.g. via attending conferences and workshops, taking part in policy development, engaging in peace processes, participating in local governance committees, partaking in working groups, etc.). Participation relies on adults opening up space/mechanism(s) which young people can join or be part of." (Unicef, 2020)

reason, that youth participation in climate governance should be facilitated through formalised structures, sustainable funding mechanisms and climate education.

What is needed to engage youth for climate justice?

Now that we have defined the concepts of climate justice and youth participation, we present three proposals that help to employ the underlying principles in practice. These proposals are concrete demands to establish structural and meaningful engagement of youth in climate policy, to provide sustainable funding for youth to organise themselves for the future they want, and to strengthen the position of youths through climate education.

Structural and meaningful engagement

Often, 'youth participation' in climate policy is not actually designed for conversation, which is a missed opportunity. Think of: a loose picture moment with a high-level representative for a press release or a meeting which is not followed by feedback on how the given input is used. These are tokenistic statements, not constructive forms of involving youth with their own futures.

To truly secure youth participation in climate policy, it is essential to design formal structures that reserve a 'seat at the table' for young people. With regards to high-level climate conferences, such as the UNFCCC COPs, states should include two people that identify as youth in their delegations during the negotiations. This starts with the preparation of the negotiations on a (sub-)national level, not at the concluding session of the conference itself. Such 'youth representatives' should be supported in building, informing and consulting their (sub-)national constituency, for example through the establishment of a youth climate organisation that is equipped to formulate their own climate ambitions and solutions. Encouragement of such practices should not only be focussed on EU member states but also within the external development cooperation of the EU beyond its borders.

By institutionalising youth participation in climate governance on different levels, one can use the untapped potential to build a support base for climate policy for the long term. Especially since the barriers to the implementation of climate policy can be highly context dependent - in particular over the Global North-South divide -, formal pathways for youth participation on different governance levels can increase democratic capacity on both a local and global scale.

Equitable funding for youth organisations

The EU and its member states together are the largest funder of public climate finance and therefore have an important role to play in ensuring these funds are spent in the right places and with due consideration for the wants and needs of the next generations. Large sums of money

are needed to mitigate further global warming, to help communities adapt to the inevitable effects of climate change, and to repair the damage done.

Beyond funding projects that directly involve adaptation or mitigation measures against climate change, youth participation in climate policy should be a funding goal in itself. When selecting projects to fund, either through climate-specific finance or through the EU External Investment Plan, the EU should therefore adopt an intergenerational lens, considering whether funding serves to lift up the capacity of the next generation to combat climate change. A concrete example is an adequate remuneration for youth that have full or part time positions in youth-led climate organisations and are lacking income or delaying their study paths for that reason. Especially in countries where young voices are more often disregarded or where youth can not afford to organise themselves, the EU should actively seek to support them.

Climate literacy and tools for participation

In order for young people to feel empowered and recognize opportunities to contribute to the climate debate, they must have a solid understanding of climate change, its impacts and existing governance structures on these themes, as well as the skills required for constructive participation in decision making. The EU already facilitates this for its own geographic scope with the European Climate Pact programme. Nonetheless, this program presents some important gaps that provide opportunities for improved climate literacy and youth participation.

It is lacking an 'umbrella' design in which local stakeholders' peer-to-peer learning successes can be 'scaled up' and replicated to a supranational level. Specifically, local stakeholders' climate education does not transcend the community or close network boundaries. In line with this, a second opportunity lies in the establishment of a global equivalent of the European Climate Pact. This would facilitate capacity-building, knowledge-sharing, peer learning, and climate action collaboration across international borders, allowing youth and broader civil society in marginalised communities to build on the lessons learned in developed countries.

The relevance of such international capacity building rests on the fact that climate change is a cross-boundary issue that requires collective action at the global level, it cannot be tackled in isolation from the EU and requires consistent and coherent action. Climate literacy and tools for participation help young people to contribute constructively and meaningfully to climate policy.

Conclusion

Since many young people already experience the impacts of climate change and have to live with the decisions regarding climate policy made today, it is no longer acceptable to exclude youth from decision making in climate policy. In order to achieve truly just and effective climate policy, we should equally invest in meaningful youth participation in both the Global North and Global South countries, which entails the following:

1. Formalised pathways for youth participation on different governance levels, through:
 - a. The structural inclusion of two young people in a state's delegation to high-level climate conferences;
 - b. Acknowledgement of the constituency that these 'youth representatives' speak on behalf of;
 - c. Support for building, informing and consulting this constituency.
2. Equitable funding for youth organisations, by:
 - a. Making youth participation in climate policy a funding goal in itself;
 - b. Providing adequate remuneration for the youth that are managing youth-led climate organisations or initiatives.
3. Climate literacy and tools for participation, inspired by the European Climate Pact:
 - a. Improve integration with existing climate knowledge exchange programs;
 - b. Foster the scaling of knowledge exchange to the supranational scale;
 - c. Expand the program with a global equivalent.

By means of these policy proposals, we call on the EU to support youth participation both within and beyond EU borders. The key to climate justice is youth participation and we, the global youth, are ready to shape our own future.

References

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