



Climate justice in the European youth field

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Climate justice is a transformative and intersectional approach to climate action that protects the rights and futures of young people, indigenous people and vulnerable populations. It ensures their meaningful participation in climate decision making, addresses structural inequalities and historical legacies, and promotes equitable relationships between people, communities and the natural world.

WHAT IS CLIMATE JUSTICE?

The triple planetary crisis is one of the most pressing challenges impacting our societies today and affecting our common prospects for the future (Stapleton and Jece 2024). This is particularly relevant and timely for young people. Not only are they inheriting the consequences of past actions without having contributed to them proportionally, but also they will be most affected by the impacts of this crisis in their lifetimes; and yet they do not have a proportional say/voice/vote to steer decision-making processes. This dual injustice upon the younger generations is widely described as intergenerational injustice, which spans ecological, economic, social and political concerns.

Climate justice has been rapidly gaining political, legal and social traction, particularly among young people.

Youth mobilisation has evolved from awareness-raising campaigns and public protests towards litigation, community resilience initiatives, policy engagement and demands for institutional accountability (Gorman 2025). [Fridays for Future](#), [Generation Climate Europe](#), [XR Youth](#), as well as the increase in [Climate litigation actions](#) (Bárta and Tuménaitė 2024), are a few of the key concrete examples of youth mobilisation which have become a defining feature of climate action in Europe.

The 2024 European Court of Human Rights judgment in *KlimaSeniorinnen v. Switzerland*, or the youth-led case *Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Other States*, frame climate change as a violation of fundamental rights protected under human rights law, creating critical precedence for future litigation cases.

Moreover, on the international stage, the 2025 International Court of Justice advisory opinion, which was adopted by the United Nations in May 2026, represents a historic legal step in establishing that states have binding legal obligations under international law to protect the climate. It also strengthens the arguments for intergenerational justice systems. Changes within EU frameworks, such as the European Climate Pact and the European Green Deal, suggest a broader shift from voluntary commitments towards expectations of responsibility and enforceable action (Kotzé et al, 2024).

For the European Union and the Council of Europe, taking climate justice seriously therefore requires moving beyond consultation processes and normative recommendations towards stronger implementation mechanisms, measurable commitments, meaningful co-decision with young people, and accountability structures capable of translating climate ambitions into concrete outcomes (SALTO 2026). Without such a shift, there is a risk of widening the gap between institutional commitments and young people's expectations, potentially undermining trust, democratic legitimacy and the credibility of climate governance itself.

EU AND COUNCIL OF EUROPE

The European Union and the Council of Europe increasingly recognise climate justice through policy frameworks, including the European Green Deal, The European Climate Pact, Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)20 on human rights and the protection of the environment and Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6 on young people and climate action. UN resolution A/80/L.65 strengthens the recognition that climate protection, human rights and intergenerational equity are interconnected and that states have obligations towards both present and future generations.

The EU currently addresses climate justice primarily through the following instruments:

- The **European Green Deal** advances climate justice by linking climate neutrality objectives with social fairness, inclusion and citizen participation. Its commitment to a “just transition” recognises that climate policies can disproportionately affect vulnerable groups and

therefore requires targeted social support mechanisms. This is reflected in instruments such as the **Just Transition Mechanism**, which supports regions and communities most affected by the transition away from fossil fuels, and the Social Climate Fund, designed to mitigate the social impacts of climate measures on low-income households and vulnerable citizens.

- The **European Climate Pact** operationalises climate justice principles by supporting citizen participation, fair transition measures, climate literacy and community-based climate action. Recent developments, including the Together in Action 2026 event, highlighted growing attention to social inclusion, energy poverty, local resilience and youth participation in climate governance. The Climate Pact supports youth engagement through Climate Pact Ambassadors, grassroots initiatives, climate communication activities and collaboration with youth climate networks (European Union 2026).
- The **EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027** acknowledges climate change as a significant source of uncertainty affecting the future of young people. The European Youth Goals, specifically Goal #10: “Sustainable Green Europe,” calls for empowering all young people to become environmentally active agents of change. To achieve this, the Strategy advocates for ensuring young people are educated on the environmental impact of their actions, included in sustainable development policymaking, and supported with opportunities for environmental volunteering and access to eco-friendly infrastructure.
- **Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps** directly support youth climate action by funding youth-led sustainability projects, climate education, grassroots initiatives to develop climate justice training and green skills development, local resilience projects, advocacy campaigns, and community-based and volunteering environmental action across Europe. The 2021-2027 programme cycle increasingly links environmental sustainability with inclusion, democratic participation and social cohesion through its horizontal priorities. One of such examples is the SALTO Inclusion & Diversity Climate Justice Think Tank, which has recently published a position paper *Advancing Climate Justice in the European Youth Field* (2026), helping to connect research, policy, and youth work practice on this emerging topic.
- The **Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness** underlines the need to act decisively on climate and environmental protection to avoid far greater costs for younger and future generations. Further, the strategy recognises that the green transition has clear intergenerational implications and emphasises that, given its focus on long-term thinking, climate and sustainability issues must remain at the forefront of discussions on intergenerational fairness.

The Council of Europe frames climate justice as a human rights and democratic issue, through the following instruments:

- **Council of Europe Strategy on Environment (2025-2030)** seeks to integrate environmental protection with

the promotion of justice, democratic governance, and social cohesion. The strategy explicitly refers to young people as important stakeholders and rights holders, integrates a youth perspective and emphasises youth participation in environmental decision-making.

- **Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)20 on human rights and the protection of the environment** calls on member States to reflect on the nature, content and implications of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and consider recognising it as a human right at the national level.
- The Steering Committee on the Environment (CDENV) advises the Committee of Ministers on appropriate action to be taken in its field of competence.
- Through a range of its **conventions** (such as the Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law, Bern Convention on the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitats, and European Landscape Convention), the Council of Europe ensures that biodiversity conservation, disaster resilience and environmental preservation are tied to human dignity and well-being.
- **Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6 on young people and climate action** recognises climate justice and intergenerational equity as core principles, emphasises the right to access to information, education and green opportunities, protects the rights of young environmental defenders to protest and explicitly promotes youth participation in climate decision-making.
- The role of young people in climate action is one of the key funding priorities of the **European Youth Foundation**. Many youth projects supported by the EYF foresee capacity building for young people as climate activists, campaigns on climate action, as well as policy work relating to the environment in the member States. Transversally, the EYF provides guidelines for reducing the impact of international youth activities on the environment, such as encouraging greener travel and reducing the use of plastics.

The Council of Europe is also increasingly concerned with the spread of climate misinformation and greenwashing, particularly in the youth field, and how it impacts democratic participation and trust in climate governance (Alves 2025). Recent discussions and activities in the two European Youth Centres have highlighted the importance of media literacy, trustworthy communication and accessible climate information for climate justice.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

The Youth Partnership has been addressing the topic of climate justice through its research on [youth climate activism](#), activities such as the symposium entitled “Young people, democracy and climate action” (Bacalso 2025),

and the development of practical tools, for example [T-Kit 13 on sustainability and youth work](#), the [Sustainability Checklist](#), videos and podcasts, and [Coyote magazine #35 on sustainability](#) (2023). It has also produced research materials, for instance the [Youth Knowledge Book #31](#) on young people and democracy in the climate crisis (2024), and analytical papers [Young people and climate litigation: situation mapping and recommendations for the youth sector](#) and [The role of the youth sector in addressing young people's climate emotions](#).



WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE DOING?

Youth as agents of climate justice

Within the youth sector there are movements that signal a broader shift from youth as recipients of climate policy towards youth as actors actively shaping climate governance itself. Young people, and organisations such as Youth and Environment Europe, International Youth Nature Friends, Young Friends of the Earth, and others, are increasingly asking formal institutions to deliver climate justice, while also building and testing climate justice practices, mostly at local and regional levels. They are doing this not only through mobilisation but also through structured participation, advocacy, litigation and governance mechanisms.

[Generation Climate Europe](#) is currently the largest coalition of youth-led climate and environmental networks in Europe. It brings together 381 national organisations across 46 countries and represents more than 20 million young Europeans, creating a co-ordinated platform for influencing EU climate policy and advocating for a just transition. The movement has led to the International Court of Justice climate advisory opinion, which was recently adopted by UN resolution A/80/L.65, and has been driven by youth organisations including Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change and World's Youth for Climate Justice. This demonstrates how young people can influence international legal agendas and reshape understandings of climate accountability and intergenerational justice.

On another level, community-led energy and food co-operatives supported by networks such as [ECOLISE](#) or [REScoop.eu](#), illustrate how local projects can simultaneously reduce emissions, increase community ownership and address fundamental vulnerabilities. The Global Ecovillage Network through its youth-led branch, [NextGEN](#), similarly supports educational and community-incubator programmes designed to strengthen youth participation and regenerative local practices. [CAN Europe](#) campaigns increasingly connect climate action with issues such as

health, mobility, food systems and social fairness, moving beyond mitigation alone towards broader notions of community well-being and resilience.

These initiatives increasingly function as social innovation spaces where environmental sustainability, inclusion, education and local resilience are implemented simultaneously. Campaigns and community initiatives demonstrate more and more how climate action and social justice are becoming intertwined.

The Together in Action 2026 event highlighted how youth organisations, municipalities, Climate Pact Ambassadors and grassroots initiatives increasingly work together to connect local climate action with broader European policy goals. Research confirms that youth engagement improves policy legitimacy, trust, and effectiveness, while also strengthening young people's agency (Tafon and Saunders 2025).

However, young people are not a homogeneous category. Climate risks, participation opportunities, and political visibility differ significantly according to class, race and ethnicity, geography, disability, migration status, gender and access to education. This insight strengthens the climate justice framing by showing that climate participation itself is unequal, that visibility within the climate movement is unequal and that some young people remain excluded from dominant climate narratives (Gorman et al. 2024). Highly visible climate activism in Europe often reflects more privileged groups, while frontline communities and disadvantaged youth are underrepresented in decision making and media narratives.

Key challenges

Despite growing youth engagement and increasing recognition of climate justice, significant barriers continue to limit meaningful and equitable participation. Access to climate action opportunities often reflects broader social inequalities, and research indicates that more than half of climate initiatives lack explicit inclusion strategies, thus limiting the participation of young people facing socio-economic disadvantage, disabilities, rural isolation, migration backgrounds or discrimination (Aglietti 2024).

Funding remains a persistent challenge. Although programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, and the grants of the European Youth Foundation provide important support, youth climate action frequently depends on short-term project funding, creating instability and making it difficult for grassroots organisations to sustain long-term work. At the same time, participation mechanisms often remain consultative rather than influential, with many young people reporting limited impact on decisions, priorities or resource allocation.

Civic space is also under pressure in parts of Europe, with growing restrictions affecting climate activism and environmental defenders. Together, these challenges highlight that climate justice requires more than participation opportunities alone. It demands addressing structural inequalities in access to resources, visibility and decision-making power to ensure that climate action does not reproduce existing forms of exclusion and injustice.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS: HOW CAN POLICIES SUPPORT THE YOUTH SECTOR?

1. Ensure meaningful youth participation

- » Move from consultation to co-decision making at all governance levels.
- » Establish permanent youth participation mechanisms in all decision-making bodies, including diverse and underrepresented young people.

2. Strengthen inclusion and intersectionality

- » Develop targeted measures for young people with fewer opportunities.
- » Integrate intersectionality into all climate policies.

3. Provide sustainable funding

- » Support long-term youth-led initiatives.
- » Reduce administrative barriers to access climate action specific funding.

4. Build capacity in youth work

- » Train youth workers on climate justice and participation.
- » Develop tools linking climate action with democratic competences.

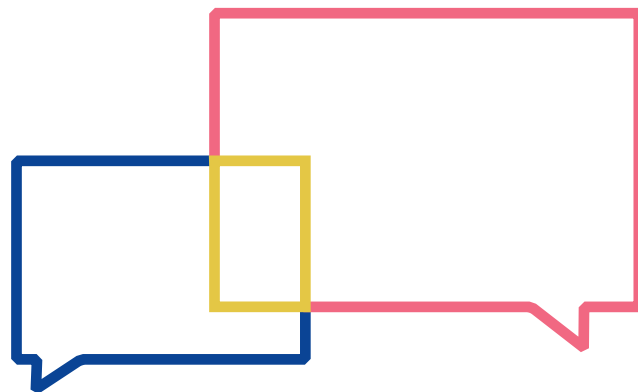
5. Protect civic space and rights

- » Safeguard freedom of expression and assembly.
- » Protect young environmental defenders.

6. Improve access to information

- » Provide reliable, accessible, youth-friendly climate information.
- » Strengthen media literacy and counter misinformation.

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