Justice Beyond Targets

The Struggle for Climate Justice in Basel

MELINDA FECHNER AND MIROSLAVA FEDOTOVA IN CONVERSATION WITH AXEL SCHUBERT

Introduction

The Basel 2030 initiative began in 2022 as a citizen-led response to the limitations of the city's existing climate strategy. Until then, Basel, like many Swiss cities, had committed to long-term emission reductions, typically aligned with national targets such as achieving net-zero by 2050. The city's approach was primarily technocratic, focused on measures like improving building efficiency, expanding public transport, and increasing the share of renewable energy. While important, these policies were framed around technical feasibility and cost-efficiency, with little attention to equity, inclusion, or the uneven social impacts of climate change. The Basel 2030 campaign challenged this narrow framing by placing climate justice at the center of the local agenda. Rather than advocating for a fixed emissions target alone, it introduced a broader political and ethical vision that connected environmental action with fairness, democratic participation, and historical responsibility. This reframing helped build alliances across political and social groups and led to a significant institutional victory: the inclusion of climate justice in the cantonal constitution. Although the specific proposal to commit to net-zero by 2030 was rejected (with the government's softer counterproposal of net-zero by 2037 being accepted instead) the campaign succeeded in embedding a new framework that continues to shape climate governance in Basel today.

This local case offers a valuable lens through which to examine broader questions such as: How is climate justice defined, enacted, and contested in urban contexts? To explore these dynamics more closely, we interviewed Axel Schubert, one of the key figures behind the Basel 2030 Initiative. Schubert is not only a leading voice in local climate activism, but also Head of the Sustainable Spatial Development Department at the Institute for Sustainability and Energy in Construction (FHNW) and a lecturer at the FHNW Institute of Architecture. His dual role as both academic and activist provides unique insight into how justice-based narratives are negotiated across institutional, political, and grassroots spaces. This paper argues that his work highlights both the emancipatory potential and the practical limitations of embedding justice into public discourse, participatory governance, and local climate policy.

Reframing Climate Policy Through Shared Values

From the outset, the Basel 2030 initiative deliberately chose not to define itself through a technical emissions target, but through the broader principle of justice. Rather than adopting a name like "Net Zero by 2030," the initiative called itself the Klimagerechtigkeitsinitiative – the Climate Justice Initiative. As Axel Schubert explained, "the value of justice is so much more universal." He views climate justice as a shared moral language – one that has the potential to resonate across political and ideological divides. For example, for Greens, it aligns with ecological thinking; for the Mitte party, it resonates with religious stewardship (Schöpfung bewahren); for liberals, it supports intergenerational freedom; for conservatives, it protects Heimat; and for socialists, it embodies justice itself. By putting climate justice at the center, the initiative anchored its claims in shared values that transcend ideological boundaries. This evokes what Newell et al. (2021) describe as the potential of inclusive climate justice to serve as a basis for broad social mobilization across divides of class, region, and identity – even if understood differently by diverse actors.

Institutionalizing Climate Justice: Limits, Leverage, and Ongoing Struggles

While climate justice offers a powerful and widely resonant narrative, Axel Schubert's experience shows that turning it into practice is far from straightforward. Translating values into policy requires navigating Basel's complex political landscape — one shaped by bureaucratic inertia, limited transparency, and competing interests. Despite its ethical strength, the Basel 2030 initiative has repeatedly encountered resistance when trying to influence government action. As Schubert's work makes clear, advancing climate justice means working within — and often against — the structures of polity (institutional design), policy (available tools), and politics (the actors involved). The challenge is not just to speak of justice, but to embed it in concrete decisions and laws.

Certainly the canton has since taken steps to institutionalize climate governance, including the establishment of the Fachstelle Klima and the development of a new building-sector CO_2 law expected in 2027. However, such advances often coexist with contradictions. As Schubert noted, even as the government prepares progressive climate legislation, it also promotes projects like the expansion of the Rhine Tunnel, which climate activists argue directly contradicts the justice-based mandate now embedded in the constitution. This reflects a broader pattern of institutional path-dependency, where "previous policymaking facilitates some pathways and delimits other potential pathways of contemporary and future policymaking" (Granberg & Glover 2021). In this context, ongoing oversight from civil society becomes essential. "We've got to control that," Schubert emphasized, underscoring the initiative's continuing role as a watchdog role and critical counterweight to official policy.

To sustain this role, the initiative remains actively involved in shaping and responding to government strategies. It has submitted formal proposals on both the existing climate strategy (focused on Scope 1 and 2 emissions) and the upcoming Scope 3 plan, which include imported emissions, corporate supply chains, financial investments, travel, and institutional responsibilities beyond Basel's borders. Yet the challenge lies not just in technical input, but in sustaining the capacity to engage. For example, the state's 200-page action plan required extensive review; the initiative responded with critical comments and noted that climate justice was barely reflected in the plan.

One formal avenue of participation is the Begleitgruppe, an advisory forum of around 30–35 stakeholders, including Basel 2030, Countdown 2030 (a network of climate-oriented architects), and others. However, Schubert described this group's influence as largely symbolic: "You can have the good arguments, but if you don't have the power to bring them into the consciousness of society, they're worthless." Without strong media support or institutional authority, even constitutionally backed claims risk not being meaningfully taken up.

In response, the initiative relies on strategic alliances. When direct influence stalls, activists turn to sympathetic political figures such as Tonja Zürcher from the party BastA, who can raise motions and interpellations in the cantonal parliament. The new constitutional text also opens a second route: lobbying at the federal level in Bern. Since cantons participate in national conferences on issues like housing, energy, and transport, they are now expected to advocate for justice-based reforms beyond local jurisdiction. As Schubert notes, "They're actually bound now to lobby for that — but it's not a guarantee.

This experience underscores the fragile nature of participatory governance. As discussed in Pickerill et al., even well-intentioned structures can reproduce exclusion if the power asymmetries remain unaddressed. *Climate justice* in Basel, then, is not only about visionary goals but about the ongoing struggle to embed those goals in institutional processes that are often resistant to change. Yet when institutional mechanisms fall short, actors like Schubert turn to symbolic and communicative strategies to sustain public pressure.

Narrative Resistance and Tactical Activism

While Axel Schubert engages with institutional politics, his work often also embraces a more activist orientation, one that draws from tactics of disruption, symbolism, and discursive resistance. A central example he offered in our interview was the de-branding of the counter-campaign's "Boomerang 2030" slogan.

The opposition, backed in part by interests linked to the fossil fuel lobby, had adopted the image of a boomerang to suggest that the Basel 2030 climate initiative would backfire economically, hurting society through overly ambitious targets. They even launched a website under the misleading name *climatejust.ch*, previously associated with opponents of the national CO_2 law, to lend credibility to their framing. Schubert's response was sharp and creative: he co-opted the boomerang imagery by overlaying it with visuals of climate disaster, such as storms, hurricanes, and rising emissions, arguing that *delayed action*, not ambitious goals, is what ultimately boomerangs back to

harm us. “To de-brand,” he explained, “is to take the power of meaning and use it against the dominant narrative.”

This reframing reflects activist strategies discussed during the colloquium’s fourth panel. Zoe from Collective Climate Justice Basel described how their group employs “tactical pluralism”, using approaches from climate camps to adbusting to intervene in the political imagination. Like Schubert, they aim to dismantle greenwashed or technocratic representations of sustainability by foregrounding care, migration, and systemic inequality instead. Both actors work to reveal how official narratives often obscure underlying injustices, and both push back through visual, rhetorical, and performative tactics. But narrative work alone is not enough—Schubert insists that true climate justice requires confronting the systemic roots of inequality.

Toward Systemic Transformation

For Axel Schubert, climate justice is not about cosmetic measures — it is about confronting the deeper structures that produce inequality in the first place. During our conversation, he emphasized the need to prevent climate policy from reinforcing existing injustices, such as gentrification triggered by green infrastructure or costs imposed on low-income households. One of Basel 2030’s key proposals — a climate fund financed by CO_2-related fees — was designed as a redistributive tool to shield vulnerable groups from the social costs of transition. But for Schubert, such mechanisms are much more meaningful if embedded in a broader rethinking of institutional logic: who designs climate policy, who benefits, and who carries the burden.

This perspective aligns with Grabs et al.’s call to distinguish between absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities in climate governance. While the first two aim to preserve or slightly modify existing systems, transformative capacity involves reimagining the very core — the goals, priorities, and relations of power. As their research shows, many “green” interventions focus on stabilizing the current status quo or minimizing disruption, rather than addressing structural injustices. A justice-based approach, by contrast, demands transformation: changing not the climate, but the socio-economic system that created the crisis.

This view is echoed in the Manifesto for an Ecosocial Energy Transition, which calls for a shift away from technocratic responses and toward a democratic transformation grounded in sovereignty, and care. In this framing, climate justice is not a supplement to policy — it is a challenge to the system itself.

Conclusion

The Basel 2030 initiative showcasts a pioneering case in Switzerland of how climate justice can be mobilized not only as a normative ideal, but as a practical, political force. Through the leadership of figures like Axel Schubert, the campaign succeeded in anchoring justice within Basel’s institutional framework. Yet its experience also underscores the limits of narrative alone. Achieving climate justice requires more than moral clarity; it demands sustained engagement across policy, governance, and everyday practices. As our interview has shown, Schubert’s dual role as activist and planner reveals both the creative strategies and structural challenges of pushing for transformation from within.

Ultimately, Basel’s experiment shows that climate justice is not about reaching targets. It’s about shifting the logic of transition itself: from efficiency to equity, from technocratic fixes to democratic reimaginings of what a livable future can be.

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