

Energy Transitions and Urban Equity

Rethinking Climate Justice through Local Infrastructure

ANNE OETTLI AND TERESA-LAURA LIESKE IN
CONVERSATION WITH HANNES WEIGT AND ANNIKA SOHRE

For our second part of the course, we interviewed two experts at the university of Basel. The first one was Prof. Dr. Hannes Weigt, a professor of Energy Economics, and Dr. Annika Soehre, an environmental scientist at the university. We specifically looked for researchers at the Faculty of Economics to learn about the influence of economy on climate justice and conducted these interviews find out their professional opinions and experiences on these topics in the context of their teaching at the University of Basel. Both are active in the Research Network Sustainable Future, which conducts interdisciplinary projects and initiatives with researches from the University in the fields of and initiatives in the areas Energy, GeoBio and the Sustainable Digital World. First, we will analyse the interview with Hannes Weigt and the second part of the paper will focus on the the talk with Annika Soehre.

Hannes Weigt

Hannes Weigt's research focuses on questions of energy and electricity market regulation in Switzerland and Europe. In our conversation with him, it became clear that anyone who wants to take climate justice seriously must deal with the logic of the market - and with the limits that can and must be set by society and the state.

During the interview, Weigt makes clear that companies are not moral actors - they act according to the logic of profit maximization. Responsibility for climate-friendly behaviour can therefore not be expected from companies, but must be demanded through clear regulatory framework conditions. Markets work - but only within the rules of the game that we give them. It is therefore the task of science, politics and society to shape these rules in such a

way that even profit-oriented companies act in the interests of the common good. This idea is central to the understanding of climate justice from an economic perspective: it is not about moral appeals to individuals or companies, but about structural incentives and binding rules that are made available to cost-causing actors. The market is not the problem here - it is rather the regulatory failure to take sufficient account of external costs such as environmental damage or social inequality.

Another focus of the discussion was on questions the distribution: who bears the costs of the energy transition - and who benefits? According to Weigt, these distribution issues are economically central and politically highly controversial. They can be seen, for example, in debates about heating costs, mobility changes or CO₂ pricing: while climate policy measures make social sense and save costs in the long term, they mean higher costs for many households in the short term - and therefore potential resistance from these. To Weigt, this is a typical conflict between individual and social cost perception: while CO₂ emissions cause real, socially perceptible costs, these are often not factored into the price. Only through pricing they become visible - but also politically vulnerable. The result: although the restructuring of the energy system is necessary, it is perceived by many as unfair or burdensome. This represents a key challenge for climate-friendly policy acceptance. Addressing individuals directly, he calls for more awareness, that the increasing costs are not new costs, but costs that are paid, by future generations, the environment or other people in the world.

Although Weigt himself is not specifically researching Basel, he identifies two central fields of action in which climate justice is locally relevant: Heat supply and mobility. Both

areas directly affect the everyday lives of the population - and therefore harbour considerable potential for inequality. In the area of the heating transition, Weigt refers to typical problems such as the tenant-landlord dilemma: landlords have to invest, while tenants bear the (energy) costs. Social inequalities are also to be expected when switching to district heating or heat pumps if certain households are unable to finance these conversions. He also sees potential for conflict in mobility - for example, if car-free zones are introduced or fossil-fuel vehicles are banned, which particularly affects people without alternatives. Local climate policy must therefore create targeted compensation mechanisms to ensure acceptance and avoid inequality.

When asked about the role of the University of Basel, Weigt emphasizes three central levers with which universities can contribute to climate justice:

Teaching: expanding interdisciplinary courses on sustainable development, e.g. a Bachelor's program that systematically integrates climate issues.

Research: Greater promotion of projects that combine social, economic and ecological aspects of transformation.

Engagement: Strategic cooperation with the City of Basel to translate and implement scientific findings into concrete policies.

The Sustainable Futures Network, in which Weigt is involved, is a first attempt to bring together researchers from different disciplines. However, it lacks clear institutional anchoring - for example through an institute or a cross-faculty center that responds specifically to the challenges of sustainable development.

The conversation with Prof. Dr. Hannes Weigt showed us how central the economic perspective is to the discussion on climate justice - and how important it is not to think in moral categories, but to create structured framework conditions. Companies and markets follow their own logic - it is the task of society to control this logic, not to complain about it.

Annika Soehre

Our second interview, we conducted with Annika Soehre, who combines interdisciplinary perspectives with concrete local challenges in her research. As part of the Network on Sustainable Futures and her projects on Energy Communities and Positive Energy Districts, she has worked intensively on issues of climate justice in Basel and Europe. Our conversation with her shows that climate justice is not only a global issue, but also a highly topical local

one - with many structural barriers, but also numerous levers for change.

A central theme of Soehre's research is so-called Positive Energy Districts - neighbourhoods that produce more energy than they are supposed to consume. This technically ambitious concept promises ecological progress, but carries considerable social risks. As Soehre points out, such districts are often created as high-priced new buildings that remain inaccessible to low-income groups. The result: instead of justice, new exclusions are produced. To counteract this, Soehre is investigating how energy vulnerability - i.e. the risk of spending a disproportionate amount of income on energy - can be taken into account in planning and implementation. According to Soehre, a nationwide survey showed that significantly more households suffer from energy poverty than assumed. This contradicts the widespread assumption that Switzerland is fundamentally prosperous and resilient. This is where it becomes clear that climate justice must also be negotiated locally in the Global North.

During the discussion, Soehre made it clear that climate justice must always be understood as an interplay between different levels. Her research shows that local participation and bottom-up initiatives (such as superblocs or neighbourhood projects) are crucial - but that political framework conditions and regulation remain necessary at the same time. She cites the behaviour of business as an example: companies act according to the principle of maximizing benefits and will only act in a climate-friendly manner if corresponding political guidelines exist. She agrees with economist Hannes Weigt in this assessment - but also emphasizes that companies must not be released from their responsibility, as they have market power and political influence. Climate justice is ultimately a question of governance: it requires both top-down structures and the promotion of local commitment - otherwise there is a risk of excessive demands or even a backlash from populist counter-movements that oppose ecological measures if they are perceived as unfair or elitist. Compared to Dr. Weigt, who sees the way how "the economy" works as given, she is more open to rethink it fundamentally with ideas such as degrowth.

When asked about the role of the individual, Soehre emphasized that committed individuals are often a driving force behind sustainable projects. At the same time, however, the entire responsibility should not be shifted onto individuals. Commitment must be possible at different levels of intensity - not everyone can work full-time for sustainability. Social norms and imitation effects are particularly effective: If climate-friendly behaviour becomes visible in one's own environment, this lowers the

hurdle for others to become active themselves. This confirms many of the discussions in the seminar on the impact of everyday practices and cultural change.

What can the University of Basel do itself? Soehre sees many good approaches in the university's climate strategy - but also major implementation gaps. The strategy is ambitious, but now needs to be substantiated and implemented more boldly. This concerns not only technical measures, but also the involvement of all faculties and groups, from the student body to the professors. At the same time, her role as coordinator of the Sustainable Futures Network shows how difficult interdisciplinary collaboration can be in a university context. Faculty boundaries, a lack of budgets and rigid structures hinder the development of a truly integrated approach to sustainability. Soehre calls for a "vessel for interdisciplinarity" - whether as a new institute or a cross-faculty centre - that better integrates research,

teaching and practice on climate justice.

Our conversation with Dr. Soehre has shown that climate justice is a multi-layered, often contradictory field. Technological innovations alone are not enough - social participation, political frameworks and cultural change are just as crucial. Basel offers many starting points: from local superblock initiatives to energy districts and university strategies. However, all of these approaches need to be more coordinated and inclusive. Climate justice is created where structural transformation comes together with democratic participation - a realization that has relevance beyond Basel.

In conclusion, the discussions with Dr. Annika Soehre and Prof. Dr. Hannes Weigt impressively show how diverse the topic of climate justice can be thought about and researched - and how much local strategies benefit from different scientific perspectives.

Interview with Annika Soehre

Interview with Hannes Weigt

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