

Climate Justice in Basel

Block 4. Preparatory Session 29.04.2025 | Public Panel Discussion 06.05.2025

A SUMMARY BY MELINDA FECHNER

Climate Justice: Governance and Local Action in Basel

What does *climate justice* demand from a city like Basel that is economically prosperous but also deeply embedded in global systems of extraction and inequality? This block explored how local governance is shaped by competing visions of sustainability, equity, and control. *Climate justice*, we learned, is not just about carbon metrics or climate plans, but about reshaping who holds power over urban futures and who is left navigating the consequences. Through an input session, key readings, and a panel discussion featuring a range of actors, from grassroots activists to political representatives, students were invited to reflect on how *climate justice* is negotiated, scaled, and transformed in the urban setting of Basel. The emphasis was on how governance structures and citizen initiatives interact to promote or hinder just climate transitions. The session illuminated tensions between top-down policy, economic interests, and bottom-up activism while also showcasing transformative local experiments.

Preparatory Session

In their input, Annika Sohre and Adam Hearn provided a grounded framework for understanding *climate justice* as it unfolds in urban governance contexts. Starting from the two historical examples of the Sandoz chemical disaster in Basel and the Chernobyl catastrophe, the speakers highlighted how environmental disasters can act as unexpected triggers for regulatory reform and public mobilization. This set the stage for examining how governance across the levels of polity, policy, and politics shapes climate action. The three dimensions - polity (institutional structure), politics (actors and interests), and policy (instruments and

measures) - frame how climate goals are set, implemented, and contested. Instruments such as regulations, taxes, nudges, and co-creation mechanisms were discussed, alongside questions of power asymmetries between actors like government bodies, private corporations, civil society groups, and local communities. The need for both top-down and bottom-up dynamics was emphasized, and the role of protest movements in generating momentum was underscored as a vital, though not exclusive, force for change. The preparatory session also included a discussion of local projects such as the wettstein21 and Erle Perle, which serve as microcosms of how bottom-up experimentation and urban greening can encounter resistance, especially around issues like parking space reduction. The relevance of strategic protest, community organizing, and inclusive planning emerged as key themes.

Readings

The readings broadened the analytical lens, inviting students to reflect on how justice is operationalized in climate governance. Granberg and Glover's article on the 'climate just city' framed adaptation not simply as a technical response to risk, but as a site of political struggle. Drawing from cases like Karlstad and Baltimore, they argued that urban climate policy must grapple with entrenched inequalities and strive for participatory justice, where procedural inclusion and redistributive equity go hand in hand.

Pickerill et al. complemented this perspective through their ethnography of eco-communities. Rather than treating such initiatives as marginal, they positioned them as laboratories for alternative futures: spaces where resource sharing, cooperative action, and participatory governance challenge neoliberal urbanism. These experiments illuminate not only what is possible

but also what is contested: even among those seeking justice, questions of access, inclusion, and power do remain.

Hearn and Sohre, in their work on Positive Energy Districts, added an important methodological intervention. They proposed evaluating such projects through the lens of the capability approach, asking not only what technical outcomes are achieved, but what forms of life are enabled. Their critique of technocentric sustainability underscores the need to center wellbeing and empowerment in the design of climate infrastructures.

Finally, the Climate Action Plan authored by Klimastreik Switzerland disrupted state-centric timelines and ambitions. With its call for net zero by 2030, the plan positions youth and civil society as legitimate political actors, pressing for faster and fairer climate action. More than a policy document, the CAP is also a call to reimagine who gets to decide what climate justice looks like and how quickly it must arrive.

Panel Discussion

The panel brought together diverse actors engaging with *climate justice* in Basel from institutional, activist, and community perspectives. Axel Schubert recounted the trajectory of the Basel 2030 initiative and the challenges of forming alliances, fundraising, and building narratives that resonate with everyday citizens. His

emphasis on transformative community organizing and door-to-door conversations revealed how deeply local engagement is essential for large-scale mobilization. Tonja Zürcher, representing the BastA! party and Umverkehr, spoke about the balance between parliamentary work and radical grassroots action, underlining the necessity of “people-centered” climate policies that resist both greenwashing and technocratic detachment. Zoe from Collective Climate Justice Basel outlined their tactical pluralism - from adbusting to climate camps - and the group's attempt to redefine climate justice around care, migration, and systemic change. She also reflected on the challenges of right-wing backlash and activist burnout. Stefan from Erle Perle illustrated how participatory neighborhood projects can enable co-created ecological transformation and foster climate resilience at a micro-level. The speaker from Backwaren Outlet offered a concrete example of circular economies in action, showing how food rescue can operate through solidarity, reciprocity, and voluntary structures. They noted how policies and neoliberal pressures can obstruct grassroots efforts, but also how hope and community support provide counter-power. The discussion converged on the insight that climate justice is not only about emissions but also about how people live, participate, and relate to one another, both locally and globally. Basel emerged as a place with progressive structures, yet still marked by unequal access to benefits, especially in industrial and marginalized areas.

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