

Current Debates in Climate Justice

Block 1. Preparatory Session 04.03.2025 | Public Panel Discussion 18.03.2025

A SUMMARY BY ANNE OETTLI

The island of Tuvalu is about to sink into the Pacific Ocean due to the sea level's rise caused by climate change. Tuvalu's inhabitants will be forced to leave their homes even if they have contributed comparatively little to climate change (Kräuchi, 2025; Prete, 2024). This injustice between those most responsible for climate change and those most affected by its consequences exemplifies the urgent need to connect climate change with justice. Climate Justice, the idea of a shared responsibility for the consequences of climate change, generates several debates about the scope of this responsibility and ways to claim climate justice. These debates take place in academia, among practitioners and in the public discourse within different arenas such as philosophical, legal, activist, political, and economic.

The philosophical debate around climate justice raises important ethical questions, such as who is most vulnerable to climate change and who should be held responsible for its impacts. Vulnerability depends on factors like exposure to climate risks and available resources for adaptation. Persons with more resources are less vulnerable (Moellendorf, 2015, p. 182). Responsibility can be viewed through different lenses, such as the "polluter-pays," "beneficiary-pays," or "ability-to-pay" principles (Kräuchi, 2025). Another complex issue is the responsibility toward the non-human world. It is complex because some species may suffer from climate change while others may survive just because of it (Palmer, 2011, p. 275). Further, Angela Martin highlights that animals can be both victims, like polar bears, and contributors, like cows in meat production. She suggests that a vegan diet is better from an ethical and sustainable point of view. These debates mainly occur in academia, hoping to influence future policies, laws, and public discussions on climate justice (Martin, 2025).

The legal debate on climate justice focuses on accountability and how to use the law to achieve climate justice, for example by litigating corporations (Foerster, 2019) or states. One example is the "Klimaseniorinnen," a group of elderly Swiss women who successfully sued the Swiss government for insufficient action on climate change (Chowdhury, 2025). This exemplifies a great benefit of the law, as it allows small actors to challenge big players (Wendland, 2025). Even if a case doesn't win, it can influence public debate. However, while law is a powerful tool, it has limitations and often supports the status quo rather than bringing systemic change (Chowdhury, 2025; Wendland, 2025).

Climate justice is also claimed through activism. For example, the group WaldstattRepression in Zurich occupied a forest in 2023 to prevent the construction of a garbage dump (WaldstattRepression, 2025). Such actions highlight the issues and form resistance against the strong, status quo-protecting system. The activist debate does not only take place on the ground but is also conceptualized in academia. Gordon (2024) highlights the paradox of how caring for the environment is criminalized because it targets companies that are perceived as "critical infrastructure". This shows in police repression against climate activists. In response, Gordon introduces "infrastructure of care," emphasizing collective action, mutual aid, and solidarity as key to a more just and sustainable world (Gordon, 2024). By constructing such infrastructures of care, activism not only disrupts the system but also offers alternatives (WaldstattRepression, 2025).

While the legal and the activist debate are mostly targeting and to some degree, demonizing states and corporations, it is important to acknowledge that debates around climate

justice are also happening within states and corporations. States are important actors in implementing policies of mitigation and adaptation, and to pay reparations for loss and damages. Further, the example of the corporate responsibility initiative in Switzerland shows that discussions around responsibility are also held in the political arena. At the same time, corporations can commit themselves to take responsibility without being forced to do so. This often happens in a so-called „corporate social responsibility” strategy (Burchell & Cook, 2013). While such strategies have to be looked at cautiously, thinking of greenwashing, they can be an important contribution to achieving climate justice.

All the mentioned debates around climate justice

- philosophical, legal, activist, political and economic - are crucial because they complement each other in addressing the complexities of climate justice. While they emphasise different aspects, they all work towards the same goal. However, the question remains whether these efforts are sufficient to do justice to all the inequalities that climate justice seeks to address. Many of these inequalities are rooted in the current global system and are difficult to grasp and even harder to change. Also, it is important to remember that climate change is happening now and not at some point in the future. As the sinking island of Tuvalu illustrates, the urgency of these discussions cannot be overstated, and collective action is needed now to create a just and sustainable world.

Burchell, J., & Cook, J. (2013). Sleeping with the Enemy? Strategic Transformations in Business–NGO Relationships Through Stakeholder Dialogue. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 113(3), 505–518.

Chowdhury, J. (2025, March 18). *Current Debates in Climate Justice* [Public Panel Discussion]. University of Basel.

Foerster, A. (2019). Climate Justice and Corporations. *King's Law Journal*, 30(2), 305–322. doi.org/10.1080/09615768.2019.1645447

Gordon, C. (2024). Criminalizing Care: Environmental Justice Under Political and Police Repression. *Environmental Communication*, 18(1–2), 138–145. doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2296835

Kräuchi, S. (2025, March 18). *Current Debates in Climate Justice* [Public Panel Discussion]. University of Basel.

Martin, A. (2025, March 18). *Current Debates in Climate Justice* [Public Panel Discussion]. University of Basel.

Moellendorf, D. (2015). Climate Change Justice. *Philosophy Compass*, 10(3), 173–186. doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12201

Palmer, C. (2011). Does nature matter? The place of the nonhuman in the ethics of climate change. In D. G. Arnold (Ed.), *The Ethics of Global Climate Change* (1st ed., pp. 272–291). Cambridge University Press. doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511732294.014

Prete, G. (2024, January 29). *Tuvalu: Why Is the Small Island Nation Sinking?* Earth.Org. <https://earth.org/tuvalu-sinking-reality-how-climate-change-is-threatening-a-small-island-nation/>

WaldStattRepression. (2025, March 18). *Current Debates in Climate Justice* [Public Panel Discussion]. University of Basel.

Wendland, J. (2025, March 18). *Current Debates in Climate Justice* [Public Panel Discussion]. University of Basel.