

Bridging Generations

Youth, Power, and Participation in Climate Justice Movements

ELENA FASOLI AND LINA DIMACHKIE IN CONVERSATION
WITH ROXANE KIEFER

As a young climate activist, academic and leader within a youth-led organization, Roxane Kiefer provided insight into the complexities of climate justice and the role of youth in shaping its discourse and practice during our interview with her. Roxane recently became president of Swiss Youth For Climate (SYFC). She has been involved with SYFC for two and a half years in different roles and has also represented the organization as a delegate at the United Nations Climate Change Conferences, also known as the COP (Conference of the Parties), on two occasions. She holds an academic background in political science and psychology and is in the final stages of completing her master's degree in sustainable development. In addition to her role at SYFC, she works as a Sustainability Projects and Research Manager at a consultancy firm, where she manages projects in the NGO sector. In our interview with Roxane, we discussed her personal understanding of climate justice, the role of youth engagement and specifically SYFC in the climate movement, the responsibility of schools and universities as well as local and global debates regarding climate justice.

When asked about her personal understanding of climate justice, Roxane emphasized that the climate crisis should not be viewed solely as an ecological issue, but must also be understood through social and economic lenses. She noted that those least responsible for the climate crisis are often the most affected, highlighting the importance of understanding both unequal responsibilities and unequal capacities to respond. For her, climate justice means finding inclusive solutions rooted in solidarity, empathy, dialogue and collaboration – rather than blame. She also stressed the importance of ensuring the participation and representation of those who are disproportionately affected and underrepresented, whether that is geographically, across generations, social

classes, gender or other intersecting factors. Roxane's perspective closely aligns with several key themes discussed in the course literature. Roxane mentioned central principles of climate justice such as social justice, democratic participation and ecological sustainability (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Similarly to most class readings, she also discussed unequal responsibilities, vulnerabilities and impacts of climate change as an integral part of climate justice (Sultana 2022; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Ranganathan & Bratman 2021; Newell et al. 2021). Her emphasis on the need for solidarity, empathy and dialogue echoes Sultana's (2022) call for more intersectional and feminist approaches in critical climate justice as well as the 'ethics of care' approach mentioned by Ranganathan & Bratman (2021). These parallels show the connected discourse of climate justice scholarship and activist understandings.

In speaking with Roxane, it becomes clear that youth engagement in the climate movement is not just about having a voice. It's about claiming space, demanding structural change, and resisting to settle for symbolic inclusion. The contradiction that those who are least responsible for the climate crisis are often the most affected by it, and yet their voices are frequently sidelined in decision making processes, forms a central point of her advocacy for intergenerational justice and meaningful youth participation. "We need to sit at the table," she repeatedly says. Not as tokens, but as actors with real influence. She critiques the phenomenon of "youthwashing", where young people are showcased in climate discussions without being given the tools or space to shape the outcomes. Her experiences at national and international levels show that youth are often invited into rooms but not into processes. At the same time, she acknowledges building relationships, developing trust, and finding

points of leverage within institutions are all part of the long process. To be effective, climate justice must be approached alongside other forms of social justice, which includes shifting power from those who are already dominant actors in decision making spaces and finding ways to recenter those who require platforms to be heard (Newell et al. 2021). She emphasizes that sometimes even sitting at the table must be seen as an accomplishment, especially when engaging with influential figures like Bundesrat Albert Rösti at eye level. Change does not happen overnight and it is sometimes about claiming that equal human position with a structurally dominant figure, and seeing what space for action can result from that.

Roxane also brings attention to the emotional and structural costs of youth activism. As part of a volunteer-led organization, many are often working alongside their studies or jobs, navigating a system that requires high performance while offering little material support. Time, money, and mental energy are constant barriers, especially for those from less privileged backgrounds. This directly reflects the ways in which, even within Switzerland and its local youth activism, factors such as socioeconomic background and gender can create greater barriers to engagement for some individuals than for others. Thus, Roxane stresses on the importance of acknowledging the local reality, and still centering an intersectional understanding of opportunities within climate action.

The role of universities and educational institutions, in general, is central here. Roxane stresses the transformative potential of education in shaping the climate movement, but she is equally clear about its limitations. While higher education institutions are often leaders in sustainability strategies and climate research, Roxane sees a disconnect between institutional discourse and the lived experience of students. In fact, her personal experiences at university were a key driver to her engagement now. Specifically, the gap between theorizing and shifting theory to practice shows the importance of actively equipping students to advocate and work towards a sustainable future. Programs like IMPULS are important in that they empower students to see climate not just as a technical or environmental issue but as a societal and intersectional one that touches every field. This creates leeway into understanding wider definitions and possibilities to climate justice and climate action. She also brings up a compelling model for curricular integration that some universities offer, in which academic credit is given for activism or sustainability projects. This approach acknowledges activism as a form of labor and learning, moving towards a sustainable education approach that is led by dismantling structural barriers.

Roxane's experiences with Swiss Youth for Climate highlight the deep commitment of young people to climate justice. She notes that youth voters in Switzerland view the climate crisis as the top political priority, whereas the general population ranks it second, after health. She argues that this intersectional awareness among Swiss youth adds significant value, demonstrating their drive to be active and responsible agents of sustainable change. Urgency and a willingness to embrace lifestyle changes, alongside larger systemic shifts, are qualities she believes young people can uniquely bring to the climate justice discourse.

While discussing regional, national and international activism of Swiss Youth for Climate, she describes the local scale not simply as a smaller arena of influence, but as a critical site where global negotiations and goals are made tangible. In the regional groups, the work is multifaceted and largely directed towards education, community outreach, and public collaboration with different types of actors like economists, researchers and other initiatives and networks like Basel2030 and KlimaseniorInnen. One point she makes while referring to regional and national achievements is the unproductive dominance of comparative discourse. She expresses frustration with the idea that Basel is already '*green enough*' or that Switzerland is '*doing more than most countries*'. This logic, she argues, is deeply flawed. Climate action is not about '*collecting gold stars*'. Instead, the real benchmark must be the gap between where we are and where we need to be. Transformative climate justice requires centering marginalized voices, recognizing the interconnectedness of injustices, and shifting from critique to action (Newell et al. 2021).

Roxane also reflects on the global dimensions of climate justice and how local activism in Basel is linked to broader struggles, especially in the Global South. When asked about Basel's position as a city which is home to major transnational corporations, for example in pharmaceuticals and finance, Roxane stresses the responsibility of Switzerland as a financial centre. The Swiss financial centre, as she notes, causes emissions that are 18 times higher than all other emissions in Switzerland which shows the high leverage in this sector. Roxane emphasizes that controversial industries must be held accountable. This includes addressing other questions of justice intersectionally and developing holistic and inclusive solutions, because the climate crisis is not an isolated crisis. She stressed that Global South voices are incredibly underrepresented and that it is always important to question how we can use our own privileges and give those voices more platforms.

Looking ahead, Roxane explains that she really wants people to understand one thing when it comes to the climate crisis: the core of the matter is not environmental protection. It is preserving our quality of life so that we can lead a life worth living with as much equality of opportunity and freedom as possible. This includes social justice, economic resilience and democratic participation, apart from ecological transformation. This basic understanding is

often lacking. She would very much like to see a future in which people live in a healthy relationship with themselves, with each other and with the earth. She believes that we need to establish a connection to this intrinsic motivation to preserve the quality of life and freedom: "If we really think this through to the end, there are probably certain values in almost every person on this planet that could be protected by combating the climate crisis."

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