

Democratic Pathways to Sustainability

The Role of Political Action and Education in Climate Justice

ANNALENA SCHMID AND ANON. IN CONVERSATION WITH
AXEL SCHUBERT

Introduction

When it comes to advancing climate justice, numerous initiatives and organizations are active across various levels, engaging in the political, individual, or academic field. Axel Schubert is engaged in all of these areas. He is an activist involved in efforts such as the “Klimagerechtigkeitsinitiative” and the opposition to the Rhynetunnel project. At the same time, he serves as a lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FH NW), where he actively encourages his students to engage with and take action on climate issues. This paper connects the insights from an interview with Axel Schubert with the broader discourse around climate justice, dividing it up in a section about the political engagement and the role of higher education.

Political Level

The “Klimagerechtigkeitsinitiative” in Basel is a notable example of a political initiative that addresses the principle of climate justice. What began as a small group of four individuals gradually developed into a larger movement, supported by numerous volunteers and a growing network of allies. Two key strategies contributed to this growth: first, the organizers established local groups in various neighbourhoods; second, they carried out a series of so-called doorstep conversations, which played an important role in gaining public support. Through this approach, they reached over 10'000 households. “It was important for us to create a positive narrative”, explains Axel Schubert from the initiative committee. “Our slogan was ‘Wir & Jetzt’ (‘Us & Now’), and we wanted our movement to be driven by ‘ordinary’ people in order to connect with everyone and create a big movement.”

The initiative aims to ensure that global warming does not exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius in the long term in alignment with the Paris Agreement. To implement this upper limit, the initiative focuses on a few key points: Climate justice, the polluter pays principle, ‘net zero’ by 2030, and innovation. There are many possible measures for the implementation of the initiative, e.g. in the areas of urban development, mobility, procurement, decarbonisation of the heat and energy supply. However, the initiative does not specify these. Parliament, the government and society will continue to share responsibility in the future to reach these goals (Basel 2030, n.d.). In the vote on 27 November 2022, 56% of the people with voting power said yes to the initiative, but even more people voted in favour of the counter-proposal, which postponed net zero to 2037 instead of 2030, but stuck to the other demands of the initiative. This means that climate justice and net zero by 2037 are now part of Basel’s constitution (Basel 2030, n.d.).

With regard to climate justice, they put the concept in the local as well as the global context, which goes in line with the discussions in our course about the topic. In their reasoning about their understanding of climate justice, they outline the following arguments (Basel 2030, n.d.): The CO₂ already emitted has not been evenly distributed across the entire planet. In the global North, disproportionately more emissions have been produced or generated through the consumption of goods produced elsewhere. Rich and early or heavily industrialised countries that emitted a lot of CO₂ in the past, therefore bear a greater responsibility today than poor and less industrialised countries. Even within a society, people who produce a lot of emissions due to their energy-intensive lifestyle (air travel, large cars, a lot of living space, etc.) are more responsible than

poorer or more economical people. Basel-Stadt is one of the financially strongest cantons in one of the richest countries in the world, and it is therefore fair that the city is particularly committed to climate protection. “For us, climate justice is a fundamental principle that must guide every action we take. After all, climate policies cannot be considered truly effective if they are, for instance, socially unjust”, explains Axel Schubert. “Take the renovation of housing as an example: such policies must be designed to prevent further gentrification and displacement. Above that, climate justice is a universal concept that should resonate across the political spectrum: with liberal parties that value individual freedom, conservatives committed to protecting their homeland, and left-wing parties focused on justice in all its forms.” Since the voting, the government has established the “Fachstelle Klima” (Climate Office). In September 2023, it released the cantonal climate protection strategy as an initial step of the implementation of the “Klimagerechtigkeitsinitiative” (Basel-Stadt, n.d.). The Basel-2030-movement remains active and continues to support the implementation of the initiative. “The strategies and measures introduced by the government are not bad, but from our perspective, they are progressing too slowly and lack the necessary ambition”, says Axel Schubert, commenting on the current state of implementation. He also criticizes the government’s failure to adequately address the issue of climate justice. To respond to these shortcomings and further advance the initiative’s goals, the committee published two recommendation papers – in 2023 and 2024 – outlining their own proposed measures (Basel 2030, 2023; Basel 2030, 2024).

The Role of Higher Education

Alongside politics, universities play a key role in shaping a socially just transition toward a climate-resilient future. Education, particularly within higher education institutions, has the power to centre human rights and social equity in climate action. It can bring to light, as we have seen in our course, how climate change disproportionately affects marginalized communities – those with limited political, economic, or social power – and why these inequalities must be addressed through just and inclusive solutions.

Axel Schubert sees the role of universities within the dialogue of climate justice in finding ways to transform society. In his words: “Today, the principle of accumulating capital is leading society. We need to get away from that and escape the economic necessity of growth. In order to achieve that, we need universities that work on finding solutions for new ways of

living.”

Further, he explains that higher education plays an important role in shaping the next generation of climate activists: “This can be done by including climate-relevant topics in the teaching agenda, inform students about the climate crisis or organise symposiums for a wider audience.” As he is himself a lecturer in sustainability at the FH NW Institute of Architecture, he tries to foster active engagement in his courses. “Universities are an important space for young people to discuss complex questions, form their own identities and define their values. That’s why I find it important to discuss climate topics with my students.”

By exploring the intersections of climate change with global inequality, education fosters the critical understanding needed to support policies that advance justice. Climate justice education encourages critical thinking, participatory learning, and civic engagement – helping individuals grasp the connections between environmental sustainability and social equity. This knowledge builds the agency necessary for meaningful action (Leal Filho et al., 2025).

Recent research highlights the growing contributions of educational institutions in promoting equitable climate understanding (Leal Filho et al., 2025). Universities are developing curricula grounded in climate justice principles, offering students a more holistic perspective on climate change and its social roots and impacts. These efforts include integrating indigenous knowledge, using systems thinking, creating multidisciplinary programs, and implementing nature-based and community-driven solutions.

A key challenge ahead lies in equipping educators with the tools and knowledge to teach climate justice effectively, and in influencing policy to embed environmental values into all levels of education. When universities embrace their role as agents of transformation – through initiatives like co-creation with communities, citizen science, and innovative pedagogy – they lay the foundation for a more just and sustainable world. These approaches reaffirm education’s deepest purpose as it was also highlighted by Axel Schubert: not only to inform, but to transform individuals and societies in the face of global challenges (Leal Filho et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Climate Justice is a broad topic and when it comes to engagement within its discourse, the range of possible actions is very diverse. Axel Schubert is a climate activist that is engaged

in numerous initiatives, organizations and – as a lecturer at FH NW – also tries to encourage his students to actively engage with the topic of climate justice. As part of the initiative committee of the “Klimagerechtigkeitsinitiative” in Basel, he is also responsible that the Canton Basel-Stadt included the concept of climate justice as a guiding principle in its constitution. In looking at the political level as well as the role of education in shaping the discourse around climate justice, we recognized that Axel Schubert’s commitment is exemplary for the multi-faceted engagement around climate justice.

Early on in the climate debates, environmental justice was seen by larger and more mainstream environmental groups as a potential source of opposition to a focus on global climate change. The assumption was that the movement and its interests were entirely local. Clearly, the idea that all environmental justice advocates only care about the local dimension is mistaken – environmental justice movement groups have long had interests in global processes and policies. Still, the concern with the local makes sense with a turn toward the impacts of climate change and adaptation policy (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). It is within that context that we understand the engagement of Axel Schubert and other climate activists in Basel.

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