

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Open Access



# Politicization of intergenerational justice: how youth actors translate sustainable futures

Henrike Knappe\*  and Ortwin Renn

**Keywords:** Intergenerational justice, Youth, Sustainability, Future

## Introduction

In recent years, sustainable futures have gained momentum in the political discourse on shaping policies to better cope with future challenges in Europe and around the globe. Society's transformation towards sustainability—formerly the exclusive domain of sustainability scholars and a few politicians and activists—has begun to become a topic of interest more widely debated in mass media and among the general public. For example, a 2019 Forsa survey revealed that most Germans perceive climate change as the country's most urgent problem.<sup>1</sup> The notable spark in interest in 2019 correlated with the beginning of the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement and with the first instances of extreme weather events that had been directly linked to climate change in public debate, for instance, the droughts in Germany in 2018 and 2019 and the severe rainstorms in 2021. When sustainable futures left the niches of various expert circles and became a political (and a politicized) subject, they also became controversial in subsequent public debates. Many disputes arose around concerns over justice. While skeptics of sustainable futures often claimed that social justice would be endangered by ambitious climate mitigation measures, other actors in the field declared the opposite, namely, that being lax about climate protection policies would jeopardize social justice goals with respect to improved living conditions and fairness for the next and subsequent generations. Both sides of the issue found support in the public discourse, but spokespersons

from the younger generation tended more strongly to support the view that ambitious climate protection measures would be more likely to increase social justice than that it would lead to less just, less fair distributional outcomes. Nevertheless, some representatives from this camp shared concerns about the distributional impacts of climate protection measures, even though they did not question the absolute necessity to prioritize climate. The position taken by these representatives manifested itself in their insistence that the potential burdens and costs of climate protection be equitably shared.

For more than any other reason, climate justice and intergenerational justice were popularized in order to expose and emphasize the different kinds of inequalities that precede climate change, which are in turn reinforced through its consequences. Until recently, intergenerational justice was something that was discussed intensively mainly among philosophers and political theorists [25]. In recent years, however, young people, most prominently the Fridays for Future activists, have politicized the term “intergenerational justice,” which has resulted in an increasing popularity of justice issues in general in environmental debates. In this paper, we want to trace how young people understand intergenerational justice and how this new understanding contributes to a process of politicization of sustainable futures. We refer to politicization as a process of shifting subject matter away from being of more narrow, administrative, or technical interest towards becoming a topic of public contestation and open public scrutiny [47]. Growing politicization of sustainable futures and the growing awareness of justice issues in sustainable futures mean that challenges as well as opportunities emerge for transformations towards sustainability. Potentially, the nexus of justice and

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2019-08/klimaschutz-herausforderung-klimawandel-deutschland-trendbarometer-umfrage>.

\*Correspondence: [henrike.knappe@iass-potsdam.de](mailto:henrike.knappe@iass-potsdam.de)  
Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e.V., Potsdam, Germany

sustainability can even drive transformation processes [29].

In the first part of this paper, we want to outline the role of young people in Western societies and sustainability politics. We intend to show how a large portion of today's European youth have become mobilized and are increasingly involved in political actions, especially those motivated by Fridays for Future. In the second part of the paper, we analyze the present discourse on justice and demonstrate how young people have translated intergenerational justice as a set of policies designed to ensure just and fair futures. We explore this translation process with the help of two empirical examples comprising sets of statements by each of two youth networks, about intergenerational justice and climate justice, respectively. We focus on two typical but different global youth networks with central organizations in European countries: the UN Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY) and FFF. We discuss the politicization of futures from the viewpoint of challenges to and potentials for transformations towards sustainability. We conclude with an outlook on how sustainable futures research could be best further pursued.

### The role of youth in sustainability politics

Youth commonly refers to persons in the age range from 15 to 24 years old.<sup>2</sup> This defines a quite broad group including minors, children, and young adults. What this group shares as a common experience (at least up to the age of 18 in most European countries) is its exclusion from a specific form of political participation and its lack of representation in some political processes. This exclusion in the “hard” form is defined by voting rights which are not usually granted to minors; in the “soft” form, it can come, for instance, as barriers to qualifying as an autonomous political agent. According to Trott, citing Kellet, Robinson and Burr [16], Qvortrup [30], and Vaghri [39], the view of youth in Western societies is rooted in the belief that children and youth are not fully fledged human beings, so therefore, they cannot and do not qualify as political citizens.

*In many Western cultures ... childhood is commonly considered to be a period in which children prepare for adulthood [16]. In these cultures, early life is treated as a protected period during which children are considered ‘human becomings’—rather than full ‘human beings’—who must learn, listen and absorb information from the sidelines of society [30]. Viewed as ‘adults in waiting’, young people are often*

*left without a voice in consequential decisions and actions that affect their lives [39]. ([41]: 3)*

Particularly with respect to sustainability politics, one general framing depicts younger people primarily as consumers rather than as contributing political citizens [43]. Another patronizing and disparaging view of younger people in the climate change discourse often presents them and other “peripheral communities... as the problem rather than part of the solution” ([4]: 278). This may discourage young people from taking part in climate activism even though they perceive climate change directly in their everyday lives. Thus, there is “a mismatch between youth representations of the environment and the overall ‘adult’ discourse. It is this discourse, not the environment or climate change, which is distant and disconnected from young peoples’ everyday realities” ([4]: 281). Sidelining youth has far-reaching consequences at the global and at the local level: “By excluding youth from climate deliberations, policy makers do not only heighten youth’s vulnerability to climate threats ..., but undermine their abilities to provide early warning signals and educate vulnerable communities ...” ([27]: 9). Young people, especially the very young, are not usually well-represented in environmental movements and sustainability politics as active participants and efficacious political actors [43].

This situation began to change somewhat with the mass mobilization of Fridays for Future in 2019. Not only has the FFF drawn media attention worldwide, it also contributed to the ongoing mobilization of a large portion of the younger generation who could now identify with “other pro-environmental actors of the same age” ([43]: 7). According to Wallis and Loy’s study of German FFF activists, the new self-identity as agents of social change became a main mobilizing factor. But even before Fridays for Future had gained full momentum, much of the German public were already acutely aware of the threats from climate change; young Germans in particular have shown increasing concern about the climate crisis [22]. German Youth was according to the Shell study in 2019 already very aware of the endangered futures they are facing with climate change, they were “speaking up” more than before about environmental protection and climate change [1]. Another study of the FFF movement in Norway suggests that young Norwegian activists have departed deliberately from the narrative of individual sustainable consumption practices, clearly favoring “systemic-level” interventions as necessary for adjustment and viewing climate change as a structural problem clearly caused by their own oil-producing country as well [12].

Our argument in this paper is that Fridays for Future and other young activists’ success stories are due in no

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth> (last accessed: 10/02/2022).

small part to an effective reframing of intergenerational justice as a concrete political demand, whereby younger generations perceive themselves as the legitimate representatives of future generations, who insist upon justice and fairness. The FFF did not start out with demands to reform laws or to fundamentally overhaul the global system of environmental governance. On the contrary, they insisted that governments stick to the letter of the 2015 Paris Agreement which most countries had signed [35]. Nor was the reference to intergenerational justice new; this has been at the heart of sustainability politics for decades. Fridays for Future mobilized with slogans that referred to their notion of “stolen futures” and the burden they would personally experience during their lifetime if no effective climate policies were installed in the present. These are all familiar narratives in the sustainability debate. Before superimposing the process of norm translation onto intergenerational justice, we want to outline in the next part the history of intergenerational and environmental justice in order to contextualize this reframing process.

### Environmental and intergenerational justice

Broadly speaking, environmentalism has been linked to justice concerns since the late nineteenth century. The concern has been about intergenerational justice, and it has resulted from an increasing awareness of disproportionality associated with the exploitation of resources in the present, so that they are not available anymore for future generations ([36]: 522). In the 20th century, we can observe two trajectories of justice in environmentalism. First, environmental justice rooted in the respective movement in the USA, and second, intergenerational justice formulated as a normative baseline of sustainable development in the global context.

The environmental justice movement in the USA in the 1980s started off as a new coalition between environmentalists and civil rights activists through the resistance of a toxic waste disposal in poor and African-American communities ([24]: 360). Environmental justice discourses differ significantly from mainstream environmentalism. While mainstream environmentalism is organized around topics such as resource depletion, degradation, and resource management, environmental justice discourses focus on issues such as self-determination, autonomy, equitable access to resources, and fairness ([36]: 534). Taylor argues that this is mainly because the protagonists of the respective discourses occupy different social positions and, correspondingly, have different environmental experiences. While mainstream environmentalism historically developed in white middle-class circles (and is still mainly driven by the white middle class), environmental justice concerns were put

forward mainly by African-Americans in the USA. Later on, concerns of other marginalized groups, particularly poor people, were included. These marginalized groups had environmental experiences quite different from those of their white middle-class counterparts, as the former often lacked positive environmental experiences such as leisurely recreation in nature or exploring the wilderness. Instead, their experiences comprised being victims of land grabbing, displacement, pollution, or being forcibly (re)located by their circumstances in areas with a higher vulnerability to flooding or other natural disasters (*ibid.*).

Being in a marginalized group with lower socio-economic status and less political agency thus allowed African-Americans and other lower-income people to frame environmentalism more readily from the perspective of justice and *injustice*. Human interventions in the natural environment were not experienced by the marginalized as steps towards wealth acquisition, better incomes, or improved quality of life but rather as steps in an ongoing process of dumping the unwanted by-products of industrial metabolism into the neighborhoods and onto those communities which had the least agency to oppose it and no resources for dealing with it otherwise. Subsequently, the distributional effects of environmental policies became another major point of contestation within the environmental justice movement. While many improvements in environmental quality benefited affluent communities, they also had negative economic impacts on poorer communities, such as higher costs for meeting basic needs or greater restrictions on small businesses affecting their viability. Taking these aspects into consideration in developing new policies meant, therefore, facilitating important sustainability transformations. For example, in the energy transition debates, perceptions of justice and injustice entered the discourse, centering on the distributional impacts of energy efficiency measures as well as the effects on income, economic opportunities, and resource availability, resulting from the shift to renewable energy sources [10, 32].

The discourse on environmental justice, which often focused on local environmental hazards, became globalized as inferences were drawn from it to the global climate crisis. The first Climate Justice Summit was organized during the COP 6<sup>3</sup> in The Hague in 2000. NGOs working on the topic released the Bali Principles of Climate Justice in 2002. Then, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina became a key event in the shift towards climate justice ([31]: 362). Hurricane Katrina showed

<sup>3</sup> Sixth session of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP), 13–24 November, 2000.

the interlinkages between social and climate justice, by uncovering the “preexisting injustices in the city of New Orleans—including the segregation, poverty, failing education system, and substandard housing” (ibid.). Schlosberg and Collins note further that “the community was underprepared, in the sense that infrastructure and living standards of minority populations were already vulnerable before the storm. And they were underserved after the storm in that they received less information, less government relief, fewer loans, and continued discrimination” (ibid.). Hurricane Katrina and its disastrous aftermath—just one drastic occurrence in a series of extreme weather events most likely caused by climate change—opened up the discourse to climate vulnerability and a comparison of similar disasters worldwide (ibid.).

Turning to *intergenerational* justice and the representation of future generations, we can see that these normative baselines of sustainability politics (re-)gained prominence in the 1980s as well, when they were articulated in the Brundtland report, “Our Common Future” [44]: “Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Because sustainable development had at its core the idea of securing prosperity without diminishing the requirements of future generations, many sustainability scholars theorized and developed concepts on how and when exactly future generations should be included in present-day decision-making [2, 6, 24, 40].

Intergenerational justice is mainly defined as a form of distributive justice, where present generations hold an obligation towards future generations “not to pursue policies that create benefits for themselves but impose costs on those who will live in the future” [25]. Democratic theorists linked this tenet to concepts of inclusion and representation for future generations in democratic institutions [9, 34]. In accordance with established tradition, however, intergenerational justice is usually understood as the relationship between the currently *living* generation and *unborn* future generations. Young people representing the transition between the present and the future generations are therefore often left out of such considerations. Although many concrete ideas about how to represent future generations have been proposed [5, 33], future generations themselves remain an abstract notion and do not emerge as real political entities.

The common diagnosis here is that future generations are not recognized because of the “presentist” orientation of citizens and voters. There is general tendency towards presentist responses in democracies because investing in longer term policies often does not pay off in the face of short election cycles and the need to be reelected in order to see these policies through [8, 37]. Thus, sustainable

futures are commonly perceived as distant from current policymaking arenas. Such abstract notions of future generations have a depoliticizing effect for those living in the present; future generations tend to be neglected [20]. As Oomen et al. ([28]: 2) note, “images of and expectations for ‘the future’ structure decision-making and social organization.” We can assume that if sustainable future is viewed through a long-term lens, it can be easily ignored in the day-to-day politics of the present. And, because the place for future generations is already “filled up,” so to speak, with those yet unborn generations, their concrete political representation by young people in the present is an approach only rarely considered in current academic sustainability discourse [21]. In general, it is doubted that young people could indeed represent the substantial interests of future generations any better than could other, older representatives from the present generation [15].

### Politicizing intergenerational justice

To politicize intergenerational justice, youth activists have adopted the more radical terms (and associated terminology) of “environmental justice” and “climate justice” and translated them into a new version of intergenerational justice. Translation can be understood to be an open processes of reinterpretation and appropriation: “... norms diffuse precisely because—rather than despite the fact that—they may encompass different meanings, fit in with a variety of contexts, and be subject to framing by diverse actors” ([23]: 105). The assumption that norms are flexible and contestable leads to a growing emphasis being placed on actors (those who translate) and their agency [46]. The underlying hypothesis here is that the increased agency of marginalized groups (here young people) will have effects on mainstream norms and discourses. As Holzscheiter [14] has shown in her study of children’s agency in international politics dealing with child labor, we can observe that policies and discourse change dramatically when affected persons, i.e., children and youth, are recognized in the discourse as valid political agents. It changes not only discourses, as Holzscheiter argues, but also procedural norms. Children and young people experience more opportunities to participate in political negotiations and decision-making, such as in the Security Council of the UN as a result of being included in the discourse ([14], p. 656). Similarly, we observe that notions of sustainable futures are neither static nor immutable but can be challenged and reinterpreted by different actors [11, 18].

Youth actors have gained more agency in recent years and also accumulated more power to translate existing norms into new contexts (see [3]). They do so by making intergenerational justice a norm that directly



and concretely affects *them* more so than it does some abstract *unborn* future generations. Moreover, the claim to be able to represent future generations goes hand in hand with being directly and concretely impacted by climate change in the future [19]. Whereas the principles of sustainability have been based heretofore on notions of long-term, more distant futures and abstract future generations, these futures have now been reinterpreted or reconstructed to be closer, concrete, and directly linked to the present generation of young people. This new framing has been underlined and reinforced by the already visible impacts of global climate change, such as the more frequent occurrence of extreme weather events in recent years, like the summer droughts in Germany in 2018 and 2019 and the disastrous floods in the summer of 2021.

As Holfelder et al. [13] point out, Fridays for Future has made generational relations between younger people and adults a political topic. FFF has criticized the older generation for ineffective climate politics and demanded alternative options for action, namely, those that have promised global environmental justice as well as adequate protection against climate change impacts ([13]: 130–131). By grounding their explicit demands on a new vision of just futures combined with a reference to evidence-based research, FFF has effectively mobilized young people for climate and sustainability goals to a degree that has never been witnessed before in the entire climate debate. This reframing of the issue therefore has motivated masses of young people to take action, increased public attention and sensitivity, and raised the overall visibility of climate change impacts [45].

The mobilizing power of Fridays for Future is based on “a deep sense of injustice” [7]. Their anger about injustices in the face of the climate crisis has motivated many FFF activists to build a bridge between intergenerational and climate justice. They express their anger over the injustice of being disproportionately negatively impacted by the climate crisis as young people whose futures stretch over many decades to come [17]; but, at the same time, they do not feel responsible for the vast amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> that have been emitted in the past up to the present. In parallel, the global environmental movement frames climate injustices by referring to injustices between the Global North and the Global South, where the line is drawn between those countries and regions that are responsible for most of the world’s emissions and those countries or regions whose populations have suffered the most from the environmental degradation and pollution caused by the former. What the FFF has done is to link the issue of intergenerational justice to the concept of climate justice, the language of which “is increasingly omnipresent in the discourse of academia, civil

**Table 1** Coding sample

	MGCY	FFF
Overall sample of documents	34	33
Number of documents with mentions of justice terms	18	23
Overall number of segments coded	28	38

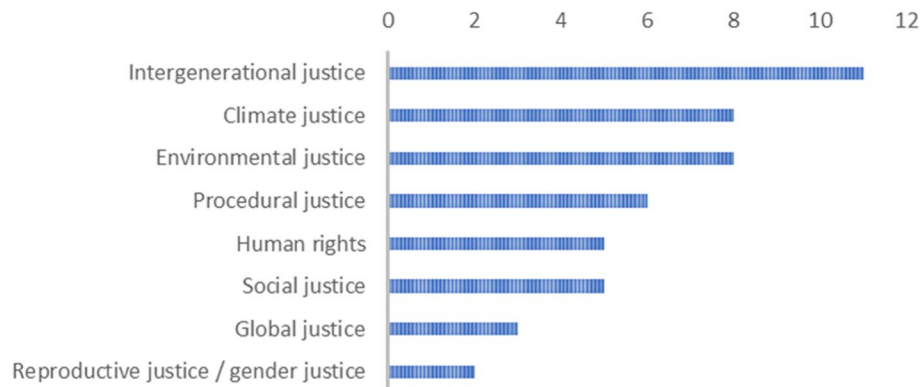
society, social movements, some governments, cities and even some businesses.” [26].

### Two illustrations of the translation process by youth groups: methodological approach

To further explore this process empirically, of norm translation towards justice, initiated by youth activists, we examine formal statements from each of two youth groups: first, the UN Major Group for Children and Youth, an institutionally established group, and second, Fridays for Future, a global social movement coalition outside of the international institutional framework. We have chosen a mix of quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods to examine statements that were published online by both groups. For our samples, we selected all of the MGCY statements issued in multiple UN forums and published on the UN website from 2012 to 2017,<sup>4</sup> and retrieved as many FFF statements as we could, published from various FFF groups around the globe on their websites from 2019 to 2021. We then coded the documents for words that are narrowly related to justice (e.g., justice, just, justness, fair, fairness, righteous, equity) with MaxQDA. Based on this data, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the segments, whereby we investigated the contexts associated with each justice claim. We first coded the different segments according to the specific type of justice to which they refer. The categories were developed inductively. When justice was mentioned in a segment, for example, as intergenerational justice or with reference to human rights, we created the categories accordingly. Segments were frequently coded with multiple categories because the statements contained references to different kinds of justice. Here we asked, what kinds of justice are mentioned and how are just futures articulated and envisioned in the segments? We focused on the immediate versus distant images of future impacts, the connection between intra- and intergenerational justice, and the link between transformations towards sustainability and its impacts on social justice. Our samples consisted of 34 UN MGCY documents and 33 FFF documents. Out of

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.unmgcy.org/> (last accessed 24/02/2022).

## TYPES OF JUSTICE IN MGCY STATEMENTS 2012-2017



**Fig. 1** Types of justice in MGCY statements 2012–2017

those documents, 28 segments were coded in 18 of them from the UN MGCY, and 38 segments were coded in 23 of them from the FFF (Table 1).

The UN Major Group for Children and Youth is part of a United Nations representational system created in 1992 in accordance with its Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), during which national governments formally recognized the role of civil society participation at UN level. The MGCY sees its role in acting “as a bridge between children and youth and the UN system in order to ensure that their right for meaningful participation is realized” ([38], 10). In keeping with its mandate, the group engages in various thematic areas across a wide range of sustainable development goal-related processes and policy avenues including intergovernmental activities, policymaking, coordination, and partnerships (ibid.).

Fridays for Future started in 2018, initiated by Greta Thunberg’s school strikes. As more and more children and young people began to strike on Fridays by skipping school classes to demonstrate for action on climate change to be taken, the movement grew into a worldwide protest with mass demonstrations held around the globe, for example in March 2019. Fridays for Future describe themselves as “a youth-led and -organised movement.”<sup>5</sup> The FFF has a more informal structure than the MGCY and is not officially part of any recognized and established political institution. The main aim of the FFF is to ensure compliance with the 1.5 °C global warming target that was established in the Paris Agreement. Fridays for Future is a very young movement—14- to 19-year olds

make up the largest contingent among protesters, and the movement is “strongly dominated by women” ([42]: 9). FFF protesters are generally well-educated; many of them are nevertheless first-time demonstrators (ibid.).

### UN Major Group Children and Youth

An initial and quite interesting finding is that the vast majority of statements by the MGCY about justice occurred during the early years of their activities from 2012 up to 2015 (25 out of 28 segments). Only two such justice-related statements were made subsequently in 2015 and only one in 2017. As shown in Fig. 1, intergenerational justice is the reference that is made most often. Climate justice and environmental justice are mentioned equally often but slightly less than intergenerational justice. Interestingly, procedural justice, for instance, referring to fairer procedures and more equitable participation in decision making, is nearer to the top of the list.

We begin by focusing more closely on the statements about intergenerational justice. These reveal more insights on how those terms are used in context. In six of the statements, intergenerational justice is linked directly to procedural justice. When the Major Group Children and Youth delivered a statement at the twentieth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development in 2013, they demanded inclusion of civil society through organizations like their own group, with reference to intergenerational justice. This could be interpreted to mean that they put themselves in the position of future generations:

*To truly defend our futures, your legacy needs to include institutional mechanisms that ensure intergenerational justice. We must not only recognize that sustainability is important, but we must create*

<sup>5</sup> See <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>.

*spaces for civil society voices to become an integral part of the process. (MGCY, 20/09/2013)*

The demand for an institutional solution to ensure intergenerational justice and, along with this, the inscription of a long-term future perspective are both further expanded in a subsequent statement one year later during the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2014:

*The long term is such an important issue that we believe it requires a dedicated body to give it the visibility it deserves, in order to orchestrate responsibility towards future generations. It would advocate for intergenerational equity in UN activities concerning sustainable development and encourage responsibility towards future generations, in order to safeguard their interests from present threats. It would be the long-term voice at the table, when everyone else is preoccupied with immediate targets and achievements. (MGCY, 01/07/2014)*

In addition to the institutionalization of intergenerational justice, the empowerment of young people is linked to it as well. Underlying the whole idea of intergenerational justice is the perception of young people as the target group—that is, those who will be concretely and disproportionately negatively affected by longer term climate change impacts and by their not having a say in present policy design and decisions that determine their future:

*Recognizing intergenerational equity as a priority is in that manner an undisputed fundamental principle to increase the empowerment of young people all over the world. (MGCY, 03/07/2014)*

This concrete future perspective is aligned with the existential nature of human rights. It is further complemented by an intersectional perspective, hinting at other dimensions of justice like social justice and gender justice:

*We are still struggling for the realization of our basic human rights. May we not forget, that when we talk about sustainable development, we are talking about something bigger than a development paradigm, it is a way of life, it is a way of ensuring that future will be prosperous and the world will be just and sustainable for all, for women and men, girls and boys regardless of their status and personal characteristics. (MGCY, 20/09/2013)*

At the thirteenth session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals on July 15, 2014, this link to human rights is further expanded upon by reference to the dangerous exceeding of planetary boundaries.

Securing a “safe world for future generations” is contrasted with the risks and dangers of shortsighted political decision-making:

*We witnessed when the means to implement this agenda were weakened to serve the hands of powerful business. And we witnessed when the definitions of peace, justice, human rights and social security became controversial. We understand and recognize that these are complex issues, burdened with red lines and instructions from capital. But we need to do better, much better, in order to deliver on the greatest challenges of our time and to secure a safe world for future generations. In today's world, we are crossing planetary boundaries, something this room does not acknowledge; we are compromising needs of future generations due to shortsighted decision-making; and we are risking dangerous climate change, already witnessing the first victims. If we don't take the appropriate action here, in these comfortable seats, the fight for achieving a sustainable world is useless. (MGCY, 15/07/2014)*

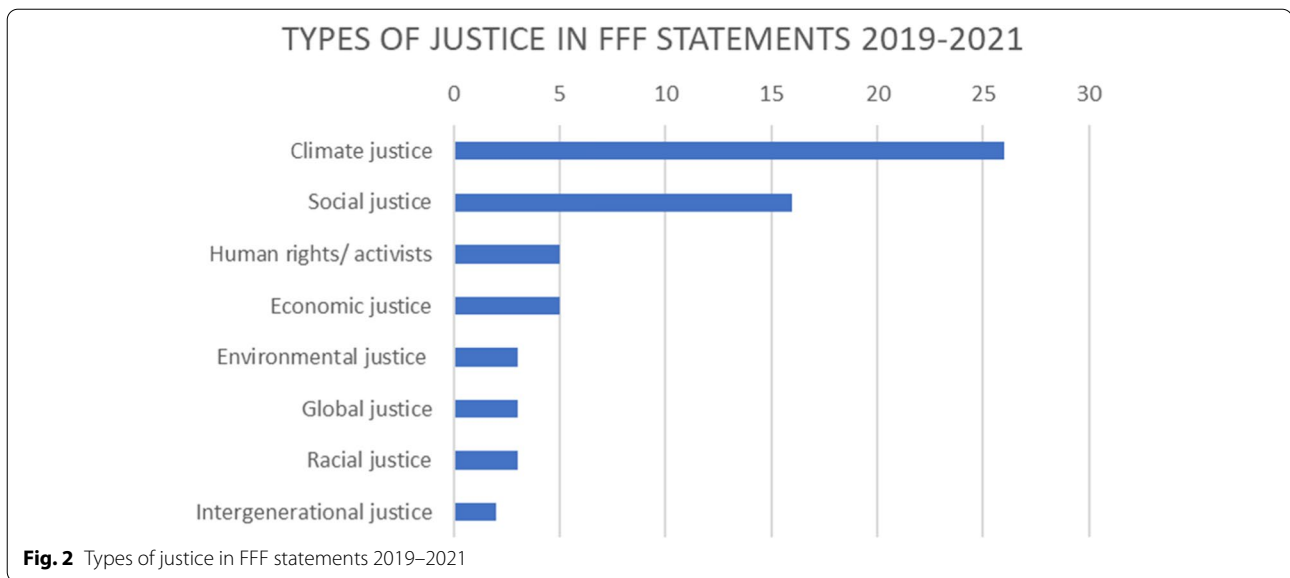
At the UN Ocean Conference in June 2017, MGCY claimed the legitimacy of personating the future by stating that young people are “100%” of it. This indicates clearly that the present generation of young people asserts the right to directly represent future generations:

*Our blue world must at all costs be based on the collective principles of solidarity, justice, equity, inclusion, human rights and the integrity of the planet. Because even though young people might only constitute 50 % of the population, we are 100% of the future. (MGCY, 19/06/2017)*

MGCY statements frame intergenerational justice first as a matter that requires institutional response. Their demand—although the proposal was unsuccessful—to install a UN commission(er) for future generations is just one example. But beyond concrete political demands, the translation of intergenerational justice as an “undisputed fundamental principle” (MGCY, 03/07/2014) signifies that it is not only at the heart of sustainability politics, but that it should be prioritized.

### **Fridays for Future**

When we looked at the statements by FFF (cf. Fig. 2), we were struck with how they referred to justice so much more frequently than did MGCY. Climate justice is the most prominent reference, occurring in almost all of FFF's statements. References to climate justice references are also often coupled with demands for social justice. However, a big difference to the MGCY statements is that FFF statements did not contain many explicit references



to intergenerational justice, but rather indirectly refer to intergenerational justice within the frameworks of climate and social justice.

In statements by FFF, we also observed that this group was significantly more pessimistic in tone, focusing more on preparation for crisis-like situations than on drafting future solutions or referring to long-term futures and future generations. FFF South Africa criticizes the fact that children are not prepared in school for “the reality of societal collapse, or ecosystem death”:

*... Our school system is not preparing children for the reality of societal collapse, or ecosystem death etc. The children are being taught to go and work in the corporate sector and go compete for limited jobs, whilst their actual reality of having to survive on planet earth in the future is not being taught to them .... (FFF South Africa, 15/03/2019)*

This anticipation of catastrophic events as part of an educational program for children and youth was also echoed by MGCY, but MGCY, unlike FFF, consider the possibility of averting catastrophic futures. The above FFF statement indicates that the group sees less hope of avoiding disastrous futures and therefore a greater need for coping measures to address an inevitably difficult, impending future. In another statement made in the early days of FFF, in 2019, FFF UK articulates what “future generations” mean concretely, whereby the abstract notion has shifted to become a tangible manifestation of real people:

*We’re your neighbours, your classmates, the kids ... at the back of the bus and the university students in the flat next door. We’re calling for our future to*

*be protected, and for those in positions of power to take the immediate and radical actions needed to address the climate crisis, not just for us, but for those around the world already losing their lives because of the devastating effects of climate breakdown. We’ve emerged as one of the most exciting and dynamic movements calling for climate justice in the UK. We have all witnessed the unprecedented numbers of young people being empowered to hold those in positions of leadership to account on their dismal climate records, lack of positive action, and abject failure to protect people and planet and allow them to flourish. Not only have we found our collective voice, but we’re using it to shout at the top of our lungs. (FFF UK, 27/03/2019)*

The politicizing moment of this statement is not only the reframing of future generations to include the young people of the present but also the political empowerment of young people considered as the potential victims of climate change who have the right, if not the duty, to demand accountability from political decision-makers. These claims are legitimated by the fact that young people feel directly affected by consequences of the climate crisis. Although this argument was raised in earlier studies associated with sustainability sciences and politics, the issue has taken on a greater sense of urgency with the personification of future generations by the FFF and with the proliferation of worldwide of extreme weather events and natural disasters associated with climate change:

*Climate Justice means international and intergenerational solidarity. As we move into what is undoubtedly a new epoch for our society, we must be very*



*conscious of the impact of our actions on future generations and other countries. Younger generations will be hit harder than anyone and will have to live with the consequences of what we decide to do in this moment of crisis. (FFF Luxemburg, 24/04/2020)*

Both groups, the MGCY and FFF, refer frequently to human rights. This trend is particularly noticeable in the FFF statements. Because members of FFF Philippines must also struggle with the political persecution of environmental activists, their demands link climate justice with human rights claims:

*All over the Philippines we have seen how environmental defenders have been intimidated, harassed, and attacked. In order to have a society where climate justice is the new normal, we must call for justice for all environmental defenders who have always been at frontline of the struggle. We challenge the Philippine government to listen to and protect our environmental defenders because they are essential to our society's development. (FFF Philippines, 21/06/2020)*

In many FFF statements, social justice was often interlinked with climate justice. Social justice is not just mentioned in the abstract; instead, concrete demands are made, such as the inclusion of workers in the decision-making in the context of energy transition. Groups in the Global South as well as those in the Global North articulate such demands:

*Our gradual shift to renewable energy should also keep in mind the workers who will be affected; a roadmap born out of consultations with and active participation of our workers and other key marginalized sectors to ensure a just transition would also be required as we press forward to the new normal. (FFF Philippines, 02/08/2020)*

Unlike MGCY statements, those of the FFF do not refer to long-term politics as a solution for intergenerational justice. Rather, the demand is for the politics to be “faster and fairer”:

*We are entering the final decade in which concrete climate action is possible. We are rapidly running out of time. This Bill must commit to binding concrete action that is faster and fairer than the 2050 target. In the coming days, an amended Bill which delivers climate justice, necessary change and above all a sustainable and just society must be delivered (FFF Ireland, 2020)*

The existential aspect to just futures for younger generations, which typically characterizes earlier MGCY statements, is also emphasized in FFF statements:

*Fighting for climate justice for your city is not a passion or a hobby; it is a necessity to keep our chances for a better future; keep calling out those in charge who don't lobby for the change we need to keep ourselves and our city safe. (FFF Pakistan, 30/08/2020)*

As mentioned before, FFF statements rarely refer to intergenerational justice. However, the notion of young peoples' future being endangered by current politics is prevalent in FFF statements similar to the frequency of intergenerational justice in MGCY statements. Future generations become personated by young activists, and their concerns have become even more of a political issue with the introduction of climate justice as a dominant normative point of reference.

### Summary of the findings

Politicizing the discourse on future generations by including the present young generation in the portfolio of potential victims and by using terms like “just futures” is typical for both youth groups. Our empirical illustrations also show how this politicization has evolved.

The UN Major Group Children and Youth frequently refers explicitly to intergenerational justice and its institutionalization. This is clearly due to the institutional embeddedness of the MGCY itself into the UN system. Also, their spokespersons and international conference participants are often recruited from the European and North American NGOs. This geographical focus can also be linked up to the MGCY's vision of equitable futures as long-term policy frames. The equitable futures concept adheres partly to the conventional sustainability framing of long-term futures but departs from it as soon as MGCY identify themselves as the legitimate representatives of (unborn) future generations. MGCY also translates intergenerational justice into something that is not to be expected only at some point far off into the future but rather as something already evolving now and posing immediate dangers in terms of climate change and exceeding planetary boundaries. This deviates clearly from the standard notion of a distant sustainable future.

Fridays for Future, on the other hand, is a more informal social movement coalition; it draws its membership and supporters from groups all over the world. Although FFF has many dominant groups in Europe, our sample is quite diverse in terms of geographical regions. FFF points to the nexus of climate justice and social justice as the basis for its advocacy of equitable and sustainable futures. This underscores the shift from long-term to short-term future horizons in youth actors' statements. While earlier sustainability discourses focused on longer term politics and policies, the increase in extreme weather events, in conjunction with new scientific

evidence pointing to a more rapid than initially projected increase in global temperatures, has shifted the focus of the discourse accordingly, from distant to more proximate future horizons. The term “intergenerational justice” has thus been reframed to include the present generation of young people. In addition, the inclusion of the present generation of young people into the frame of future generations has inevitably drawn attention to the notion of intragenerational justice as well as to the glaring inequities between the Global South and the Global North, for which the FFF promotes youth empowerment as a decisive factor in the quest for fast and radical transformation towards sustainable futures. What we can see in the difference between both groups is at first a *process* of translation, starting with the earlier statements by the MGCY with an explicit reference to intergenerational justice and long-term futures to the later statements by the FFF who incorporate newer experiences with direct effects of the climate crisis. Also, the differences between both groups can be traced back to the specific geographical locations of groups in the respective networks. While MGCY partly reflects a Global North perspective that sticks to dominant notions of sustainable development, FFF incorporates many voices of the Global South that are critical about this and also reflect on their own immediate experience with climate change that is not a matter of the future, but a part of their present daily lives.

## Conclusions

The politicization of sustainable futures as advocated by youth actors was the main topic of this paper. We have shown that this politicization is driven by actors from contemporary youth organizations who place themselves in the position of future generations and link environmental demands with intergenerational justice concerns although they can be seen as marginalized actors with less power than other actors in global environmental politics. We have traced the various stages of how the norms of sustainable futures and future generations were translated from abstract notions of intergenerational justice towards concrete manifestations of future generations as part of today’s youth. This inclusive notion of future generations allows the sustainability framework to be expanded to include climate and social justice. The customary distinction between *intragenerational* and *intergenerational* justice could be overcome by showing that, from the standpoint of injustice, the younger generation was clearly victims of both intra- and intergenerational inequality and unfairness.

The tendency to shorten the time horizon so that sustainable futures transform into more immediate futures deserves more systematic research. This tendency is certainly the result of a deliberate reframing

done by the actors themselves, but it is also a reflection of one’s previous experiences with climate change impacts. This experience may increase over time and then amplify the reframing effort which, in turn, could lead to a more radical shift in norms and policies, as the established policymakers come increasingly under public pressure. It might be interesting to observe at what level of politicization existing norms start to crumble and are slowly or radically replaced by new norms and policy expectations.

The empirical illustrations provided several hints about the increased politicization and the reframing of sustainable futures as just futures for today’s youth. Linked to this observation is the question of potentials and challenges that come with justice concerns in sustainable futures. Can the shift towards climate justice facilitate transformations towards sustainability or will it, instead, amplify conflict or even lead to political paralysis? To address this question more systematically, further study is required to observe and document the dynamic evolution of translation processes and corresponding narratives in the discourse on sustainable futures and the role that young actors will take in this discourse.

## Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40309-022-00194-7>.

**Additional file 1.** List of statement papers by MGCY.

**Additional file 2.** List of statements by FFF.

## Authors’ contributions

The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

## Funding

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 25 August 2021 Accepted: 22 March 2022

Published online: 19 April 2022

## References

1. Albert M, Hurrelmann K, Quenzel G (2019) Jugend 2019: Eine Generation meldet sich zu Wort, 1. Auflage edn. Beltz, Weinheim
2. Beckman L (2013) Democracy and future generations. Should the unborn have a voice? In: Merle J-C (ed) Spheres of global justice. Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht, pp 775–788
3. Berger T, Esguerra A (eds) (2018) World politics in translation: power, relationality and difference in global cooperation, first published. Routledge, London, New York
4. Börner S, Kraftl P, Giatti LL (2021) Blurring the ‘-ism’ in youth climate crisis activism: everyday agency and practices of marginalized youth in the Brazilian urban periphery. *Child Geogr* 19(3):275–283
5. Caney S (2016) Political institutions for the future. In: González-Ricoy I, Gosseries A (eds) Institutions for future generations, 1st edn. Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, pp 135–155

6. Caney S (2018) Justice and future generations. *Annu Rev Polit Sci* 21(1):475–493
7. Dirth E (2019) Responding to Fridays for future and the youth movement for climate justice. <https://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/blog/2019/09/responding-fridays-future-and-youth-movement-climate-justice>. Accessed 8 Oct 2021
8. Dobson A (1997) Representative democracy and the environment. In: Lafferty WM, Meadowcroft J (eds) *Democracy and the environment: Problems and prospects*, reprinted. Elgar, Cheltenham
9. González-Ricoy I, Gosseries A (2016) Designing institutions for future generations: an introduction. In: González-Ricoy I, Gosseries A (eds) *Institutions for future generations*, 1st edn, pp 3–23
10. Gürtler K, Herberg J (2021) Moral rifts in the coal phase-out—how mayors shape distributive and recognition-based dimensions of a just transition in Lusatia. *J Environ Policy Plann* 88(1):1–16
11. Hajer MA, Pelzer P (2018) 2050—An energetic odyssey: understanding ‘techniques of futuring’ in the transition towards renewable energy. *Energy Res Soc Sci* 44:222–231
12. Haugestad CAP, Skauge AD, Kunst JR, Power SA (2021) Why do youth participate in climate activism? A mixed-methods investigation of the #FridaysForFuture climate protests. *J Environ Psychol* 76(3):101647
13. Holfelder A-K, Singer-Brodowski M, Holz V, Kminek H (2021) Erziehungswissenschaftliche Fragen im Zusammenhang mit der Bewegung Fridays for Future. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* (1):120–131. <https://doi.org/10.3262/ZP2101120>
14. Holzscheiter A (2018) Affectedness, empowerment and norm contestation – children and young people as social agents in international politics. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 3(5–6):645–663
15. Karnein A, Roser D (2015) Saving the planet by empowering the young? In: Tremmel J, Mason A, Godli PH, Dimitrijoski I (eds) *Youth quotas and other efficient forms of youth participation in ageing societies*. Springer, Cham
16. Kellett M, Robinson C, Burr R (2004) Images of Childhood. In *Doing Research with Children and Young People*, edited by Sandy Fraser, Vicki Lewis, Sharon Ding, Mary Kellett, and Chris Robinson, 27–42. Sage, Thousand Oaks
17. Kenis A (2021) Clashing Tactics, Clashing Generations: The Politics of the School Strikes for Climate in Belgium. *Politics and Governance* 9(2):135–145
18. Knappe H (2020) Globale Zukunftsvisionen und die Repräsentation alternativer Zukünfte. In: Tamoudi N, Faets S, Reder M (eds) *Politik der Zukunft*. transcript-Verlag, Bielefeld, pp 87–106
19. Knappe H (2021) Justice and the Climate Crisis: Germany’s Constitutional Court Rules on Climate Action Legislation. - IASS Blog, 11.05.2021. <https://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/blog/2021/05/bundesverfassungsgerichts-urteil-zum-klimaschutzgesetz>
20. Knappe H (2022) Political Representation and Sustainable Futures. In: Bornemann, B., Knappe, H. & Nanz, P. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Democracy and Sustainability*. Routledge
21. Knappe H, Schmidt O (2021) Making Representations: The SDG Process and Major Groups’ Images of the Future. *Global Environmental Politics* 21(2):23–43
22. Koos S, Naumann E (2019) Vom Klimastreik zur Klimapolitik. Die gesellschaftliche Unterstützung der “Fridays for Future“-Bewegung und ihrer Ziele
23. Krook ML, True J (2012) Rethinking the life cycles of international norms: the United Nations and the global promotion of gender equality. *Eur J Int Relat* 18(1):103–127
24. Lawrence P (2019) Representation of future generations. In: Kalfagianni A, Fuchs D, Hayden A (eds) *Routledge handbook of global sustainability governance*. Routledge, Other titles: *Global sustainability governance Description*, vol 2020. Routledge, New York, pp 88–99
25. Meyer LH (2021) Intergenerational justice. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition)
26. Newell P, Srivastava S, Naess LO, Torres Contreras GA, Price R (2020) Towards transformative climate justice: key challenges and future directions for research. IDS working paper 540. Institute of Development Studies, Brighton
27. Nkrumah B (2020) Eco-activism: youth and climate justice in South Africa. *Environ Claims J* 24(2):1–23
28. Oomen J, Hoffman J, Hajer MA (2021) Techniques of futuring: on how imagined futures become socially performative. *Eur J Soc Theory* 82:136843102098882
29. Patterson JJ, Thaler T, Hoffmann M et al (2018) Political feasibility of 1.5°C societal transformations: the role of social justice. *Curr Opin Environ Sustain* 31:1–9
30. Qvortrup J (2009) Are Children Human Beings or Human Becomings? A Critical Assessment of Outcome Thinking. *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali* 3-4:631–653.
31. Schlosberg D, Collins LB (2014) From environmental to climate justice: climate change and the discourse of environmental justice. *Wiley Interdiscip Rev Clim Change* 5(3):359–374
32. Setton D, Renn O (2021) Wie fair ist die Energiewende? Ergebnisse einer Paneluntersuchung zur wahrgenommenen Gerechtigkeit bei der Kostenverteilung. *Ifo Schnelldienst* 74(6):22–25
33. Smith G (2020) Enhancing the legitimacy of offices for future generations: the case for public participation. *Polit Stud* 68(4):996–1013
34. Smith G (2021) Can democracy safeguard the future?
35. Sommer M, Rucht D, Haunss S, Zajak S (2019) Fridays for FutureProfil, EntstehungundPerspektiven der Protestbewegung in Deutschland. ipb working papers 2
36. Taylor DE (2000) The rise of the environmental justice paradigm. *Am Behav Sci* 43(4):508–580
37. Thompson DF (2010) Representing future generations: political presentism and democratic trusteeship. *Crit Rev Int Soc Political Philos* 13(1):17–37
38. UN Major Group for Children and Youth (2017) *Process and Procedures*. Available at: <http://www.unmgcy.org/>. Last accessed 18 Jan 2021
39. Vaghri Z (2018) Climate Change, An Unwelcome Legacy: The Need to Support Children’s Rights to Participate in Global Conversations. *Children, Youth and Environments* 28(1):104–114
40. Tremmel J (ed) (2003) *Handbuch Generationengerechtigkeit*, 2., überarb. Aufl. ökom Verl., München
41. Trott CD (2021) What difference does it make? Exploring the transformative potential of everyday climate crisis activism by children and youth. *Child Geogr* 19(3):300–308
42. Wahlström M, Kocyba P, Vydrt M (n.d.) de Protest for a future: composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European cities
43. Wallis H, Loy LS (2021) What drives pro-environmental activism of young people? A survey study on the Fridays For Future movement. *J Environ Psychol* 74(2):101581
44. WCED (1987) *Our common future*, 13. impr. Univ Press, Oxford
45. Wehrden H v, Kater-Wettstädt L, Schneidewind U (2019) Fridays for Future aus nachhaltigkeitswissenschaftlicher Perspektive. *GAIA Ecol Perspect Sci Soc* 28(3):307–309
46. Zimmermann L, Deitelhoff N, Lesch M (2017) Unlocking the agency of the governed: contestation and norm dynamics. *Third World Thematics TWQ J* 2(5):691–708
47. Zürn M, Binder M, Ecker-Ehrhardt M (2012) International authority and its politicization. *Int Theory* 4(1):69–106

## Publisher’s Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.