
ROLE OF YOUTH IN SHAPING GLOBAL CLIMATE JUSTICE: PROVIDING A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Youth Activism in the climate crisis has been an ongoing debate worldwide. Many international forums recognized youth activism, and youth participation in various forums dealing with climate change is increasing rapidly. Judiciary is also playing a vital role by deciding youth-led petitions, providing a basis for climate litigations. This societal behaviour of youth addressing climate change is promoting the circular economy. This research paper focuses mainly on youth – led movements and litigations and how these are contributing to shaping climate justice globally. However, this paper is restricted to the doctrinal study of case laws and movements, and it doesn't look into the history of youth activism. In this research, the researcher is focusing on global movements and litigations done by youth in climate justice and how these have affected in shaping climate justice globally, promoting the circular economy.

Keywords: Climate change, youth-led movements, litigation, and the circular economy.

Introduction.

The climate crisis is one of the most urgent and complex challenges of the 21st century, and the most affected and yet the most underrepresented stakeholders in this global crisis are young people. The concept of climate justice emphasizes not only the scientific aspects of climate change but also its ethical, social, and legal dimensions, particularly the impact it has on vulnerable populations, including the youth, women, and marginalized groups. Young people are recognizing their right to a safe and healthy environment from the adverse effects of climate change through youth activism by Fridays for Future, Youth Climate Strikes, and YOUNGO. These have been influencing public opinion and international policymaking. Furthermore, youth are now demanding that governments make climate commitments through cases such as *Juliana v. United States*¹, *Urgenda v. Netherlands*², and *Neubauer v. Germany*³. These cases mark a significant change in youth representation as active participants in addressing climate injustice. Despite these significant challenges persisting in youth recognition, such as international conventions and human rights treaties provide only limited binding protection or enforceable rights. This research paper critically examines the role of youth in shaping global climate justice, focusing on their participation through climate litigation and international forums. The paper explores how existing international laws and principles either enable or restrict youth in bringing climate justice, analyses judicial attitudes in youth-led climate litigation, and evaluates the normative significance of concepts such as intergenerational equity used in achieving climate justice. The study aims to assess not only the current legal landscape but also the future trajectory of youth influence in climate governance, identifying gaps and opportunities present in the current legal framework in promoting youth activism and thereby leading to its recognition. The underlying idea of this paper is to understand how international laws and conventions have accepted youth activism in shaping climate justice.

Youth and Climate Change.

Anthropogenic activities such as the use of fossil fuels, unsustainable practices, and deforestation lead to an increase in carbon emissions, which eventually leads to climate change. This climate change causes many issues, such as a rise in sea level, insecurity in food and

¹ *Juliana v US* [2020] 947 F.3d 1159 (9th Cir. 2020); No. 6:15-CV-01517-TC, 2016 WL6661146

² *Urgenda v. State of Netherlands*, Hoge Raad (High Council), Case no. 19/00135, Judgment dated 20-12-2019.

³ *Neubauer et al. v Germany*, Case No. BvR 2656/18/1, BvR 78/20/1, BvR 96/20/1, BvR 288/20, Judgment dated 24-03-2021.

health, melting of glaciers, displacement, malnutrition, etc. This change mainly affects children, women, and the marginalized community. For these reasons, youth are trying to transform our societies towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient future. Therefore, Youth Movements are becoming the forefront in pushing the recognition of climate change globally. They are using powerful movements and strategic methods to achieve climate justice, such as Fridays for Future, Sunrise Movements, and African Youth Initiative on Climate Change.

Youth Activism in the Climate Crisis.

Youth-led movements in addressing the climate crisis started from early 2000s. Climate justice movements not only focus on climate crises, but also address international coloniality of imperialism, capitalism, and international development that governs each state's international affairs. IPCC AR6 also states that colonialism was a driving force behind climate change⁴. Young people demanding for lowering greenhouse gas emission thereby reducing global temperature, and requesting system-level reforms towards equity and the need for social justice are enshrined in climate strikes in Switzerland. Youth activism always comes up with the name of Greta Thunberg, her protest known as “Friday for Future”, which is “school strike for climate”. This is a protest organized by Greta Thunberg along with youth skipping school on Friday in demand of turning the fossil fuel industry to transition to renewable energy. This demand was put forward to the Swedish government. This movement became the basis of all other youth-led movements and led to the creation of various forums such as climate strikes in Switzerland, Youth for Climate Belgium, Fridays for Future Sweden, Todos Por El Futuro, etc. Friday for Future not only focused on curbing GHG emission it also focused on other varying variables of climate change, such as indigenous self-determination, intersectionality, reparations for communities of colour, and Indigenous communities. This protest paved the way for the formation of the International Congress of Youth Voice. International Union for Conservation of Nature Youth Strategy 2022- 2030 recognized that youth are key players in promoting climate justice and can also participate in decision making process of climate governance. In India Youth activism was going on with the Indian Youth Climate Network, formed in 2008 to take action on climate change and promote climate Justice. America, the state which having very cold attitude towards addressing climate change, has Sunrise movement which is an American political action organization that advocates political action

⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Sixth Assessment Report (2022), <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>

on climate change.

Current Scenario.

“Youths are no strangers to the histories and, importantly, levers of change that must be grasped to create futurities other than our current trajectory.”⁵

Youth Activism is making an impact globally by influencing people worldwide, gaining mainstream attention, and support through various campaigns. Friday for Future, Sunrise Movement are making way for activist forums worldwide in demanding climate governance. These youth movements are mobilizing across borders, influencing climate debates by highlighting collective voice. Starting from 2009, youth have been represented as a stakeholder in COPs through YOUNGO. In COP24, Greta Thunberg was invited to give a speech, which makes it clear that youth movements are getting recognition. Therefore, Friday for the Future was recognized, and COP26 looked into the motto promoted by this strike. Starting from 2004, children and young people started participating in annual UNEP Tunza International Conferences, representing over 100 countries. In 2009, UNFCCC extended constituency status to admitted youth NGO's, allowing them to receive official information, participate in meetings, request speaking slots, and receive logistical support at the UNFCCC conference. With the YouthXchange initiative, UNESCO and the United Nations Environment Programme started supporting youth projects on sustainable lifestyles. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme supports youth-led groups to develop programmes to mitigate the effects of climate change in urban areas⁶.

Youth- led Litigations.

Youth – led litigation is paving the way for public discourse and transforming legal frameworks in shaping climate governance. Youth- led petition are mainly against governments' inaction and weak policies. In the case of *Ridhima Pandey v. Union of India*⁷ nine-year-old girl approached the NGT, stating that the “climate” is also included under the Environment Protection Act, 1986, under the term “environment”. The petition was filed under section 2(m)

⁵By Onyx Sloan Morgan, Youth and climate justice: Representations of young people in action for sustainable futures,

<https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12547>.

⁶ <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-climatechange.pdf>

⁷ *Ridhima Pandey v. Union of India*, CA no 388 of 2021

of the NGT Act, 2010. The petition addressed the Public Trust Doctrine, India's commitments under the Paris Agreement, and existing environmental laws and climate-related policies governing India. The petitioner is requesting the state to take responsibility in recognizing climate change and take up policies to mitigate it. The petition is built on the foundational basis of *Urgenda v. State of Netherlands*⁸, *Asghar Leghari v Federation of Pakistan*⁹, and *Juliana v. United States*¹⁰. Petitioner argued that children were vulnerable to impacts like heat waves, displacement, diseases, and malnutrition. Depending on the principles of sustainable development, the precautionary principle, and intergenerational equity, to curb carbon emission thereby addressing climate change in India. Petitioner also states that India is becoming the greatest carbon emitter and that, in granting environment clearances, and to align with the Paris Agreement and other international protocols, should be taken into consideration while making the policies of the Government of India. Yet, on January 15, 2019, the National Green Tribunal dismissed the case, reasoning that climate change is already covered in the process of impact assessments under the Environment Protection Act of 1986. However, the case is under appeal before the SC of India. On February 21, 2025, the Supreme Court issued notice in the matter and made the following key observations:

1. "While considering that India has ratified and incorporated the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement nationally through various initiatives, the court recognises that the enforceability and binding force of these initiatives must be examined.
2. Court also noted that a meticulous examination of the existing environmental statutes is necessitated "with a view to incorporating climate-centric mandates."
3. Court also recognised synchronisation of the institutional framework under various ministries and directed 8 Indian ministries to be impleaded as parties"¹¹. In the case of *Sacchi, et al. v. Argentina et al*¹² Sixteen children filed a petition against Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, and Turkey, stating that their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are violated by emitting the greatest amount of carbon, thereby paving the way for climate change. According to petitioners, all state is signatory of Paris Agreement.

⁸ Supra note 2

⁹ *Asghar Leghari v Federation of Pakistan*, [2015] W.P. No. 25501/201

¹⁰ Supra note 1

¹¹ Supra Note 17

¹² *Sacchi et al. v. Argentina et al.*, Communication No. 107/2019, U.N. Doc. CRC/C/88/D/107/2019, decided on 8-10-2021.

However, none have kept their commitments that align with keeping the temperature rise under 2 degrees Celsius. On October 12, 2021, CRC rejected the petition as inadmissible, stating that petitioners should resort to their local jurisdiction. In *Juliana v. United States*¹³, young plaintiffs filed a complaint against the federal government for causing dangerous carbon emission thereby violating their constitutional rights. The US Supreme Court denied the petition by saying that the court has no role in making government policy and stated that policymaking is vested with the federal government. In case of *Neubauer, et al. v. Germany*¹⁴ in February 2020, group of German youth filed petition against “Bundesklimaschutzgesetz” or “KSG” which means Germany's Federal Climate Protection Act in the Federal Constitutional Court stating that target of reducing GHGs by 55% until 2030 from 1990 levels was insufficient and petitioners argued that Germany would need to reduce GHGs by 70% from 1990 levels by 2030. Their claims were based on the fundamental right to a future consistent with human dignity enshrined in Article 1 (1) of the German Constitution and Right to Life and Physical Integrity enshrined in Article 2(2) and Article 20a of the German Basic Law. On April 29, 2021 the federal constitutional court stated that “Article 20a of the Basic Law not only obliges the legislature to protect the climate and aim towards achieving climate neutrality, but also concerns how environmental burdens are spread out between different generations”¹⁵. Thereby decided that “KSG” emission cut is incompatible with Fundamental rights and ordered the government to set clear emission target of minimum 65% by 2030.

Youth Activism in the Circular Economy

The transition from a linear “take–make–dispose” model to a circular economy requires not only technological innovation and policy reform but also profound social and behavioural change. In this context, youth activism has emerged as a critical driver of circular economy transitions, shaping consumption patterns, influencing governance, and embedding principles of justice and sustainability into economic systems.

Youth activism in the circular economy refers to the collective efforts of young people to promote resource efficiency, waste reduction, reuse, recycling, and regenerative practices. Young people are often at the forefront of campaigns against plastic pollution, fast fashion, electronic waste, and unsustainable consumption. Through everyday practices such as zero-

¹³ Supra NOTE 1

¹⁴ Supra Note 3

¹⁵ ID

waste living, upcycling, repair initiatives, and sharing economies, youth activists translate abstract circular economy concepts into visible and replicable social behaviours. These actions contribute to normalising sustainable lifestyles and reshaping social norms around consumption and disposal.

A key contribution of youth activism lies in its ability to drive behavioural change. Circular economies depend heavily on consumer participation, including waste segregation, product longevity, and acceptance of refurbished or shared goods. Youth movements leverage peer influence, digital platforms, and social media to promote circular practices, thereby amplifying behavioural spillover effects across communities. By reframing sustainability as both desirable and achievable, youth activism lowers social resistance to circular transitions.

Youth activism also plays a vital role in social innovation and grassroots experimentation. Many youth-led initiatives operate as local “niches” where circular solutions are tested, such as community recycling programmes, campus-based circular systems, and youth-run social enterprises focused on repair and reuse. These bottom-up innovations complement top-down policy approaches and contribute to broader sustainability transitions by demonstrating alternative economic models in practice.

In addition, youth activism significantly influences policy advocacy and governance. Young activists increasingly engage with policymakers, demand stricter waste regulations, support extended producer responsibility, and call for corporate accountability. Their participation enhances the democratic legitimacy of circular economy policies and ensures that long-term environmental considerations are not overshadowed by short-term economic interests. Importantly, youth activism often emphasises intergenerational equity, highlighting the unfair burden that linear economic systems impose on future generations.

Finally, youth activism connects the circular economy with climate and environmental justice. Activists draw attention to how waste mismanagement and resource extraction disproportionately affect marginalised communities, particularly in the Global South. By advocating inclusive and just circular transitions, youth movements challenge purely market-driven models and push for systems that recognise social equity, labour rights, and community participation.

Impact in Global World.

The main impact of youth activism is that recognition by UNFCCC, that is, UNFCCC extended a constituency status to admit youth NGOs by allowing them to receive official information, participate in meetings, and give their opinion in UNFCCC Conferences. Thereby, YOUNGO started playing a vibrant role in addressing climate change. After getting worldwide recognition of Friday for Future protest, many youths started projects which addressing climate change issues nationally and internationally. Recent years have made a drastic change in youth involvement in addressing the climate change crisis, as we can see that more than 10,000 youth have participated in the climate change challenge badge developed by FAO and the United Nations Global Youth Alliance. Starting from 2004, Youth started participating in annual UNEP Tunza International Conferences, which address issues ranging from climate change to the green economy and green jobs. During regional conferences of UNEP, youth and children started participating and giving their opinions. As we trace globally, we can see climate change movements are happening, such as the Climate Village Program in Indonesia, carried out locally through synergy between the central government, regional governments, and non-governmental organizations in Addressing climate crisis. In Cambodia, youth are engaging in climate action through the Local Conferences of Youth by collaborating with YOUNGO, the official youth constituency of UNFCCC. In India, the Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN) is the forum that deals with addressing climate change, and in Africa, the most vulnerable to climate change are children. So, they have dedicated youth forums such as African Youth Climate Initiatives, which include;

- Pan African Climate Justice Alliance- youth chapter
- Fridays for Future Africa
- African Youth Climate Hub

Various youth – led litigations also started creating changes in the policy framework, as looking into *Sacchi et al. v. Argentina, et al*, despite the dismissal of the case precedent, have been set up stating that states have extra-territorial obligations to protect children’s rights from climate change impacts. By looking into the latest order of *Ridhima Pandey v. Union of India*¹⁶The court ordered that several ministries should be coordinated and make climate-centric and

¹⁶ Supra note 17

enforceable mandates focusing on the transition of energy.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

Starting from COP24, youth are getting recognized, which is impacting globally by reshaping climate justice and making public discourse, pushing the legislation to make governing climate policies nationally and internationally. Inviting Greta Thunberg for a speech in COP25 created a worldwide reach of addressing the climate crisis by following her many youth forums, which started developing and recognition of climate change set a goal of global acclaim. However, Challenges like differences in the notion of the legal system, socio-economic factors, and limited resources in different states made difficulty to secure consistent accountability and binding climate action. Making institutional frameworks for youth engagement, providing financial, technical, and other support, and implementing educational policies can abridge many of the challenges faced globally, thereby embedding climate justice globally. In conclusion, youth activism is a powerful social and behavioural force advancing the circular economy. By influencing consumption norms, fostering grassroots innovation, shaping policy discourse, and embedding justice considerations, young people play a central role in enabling a sustainable and inclusive transition towards circular economic systems.

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