

## Communicating climate justice with young adults in Europe



## Executive summary

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This project is being undertaken as part of SPARK, a four-year European Commission (EC) funded project that aims to build the awareness, capacity and active engagement of European Union (EU) citizens, particularly young people, with efforts to bring about climate justice. SPARK is delivered by a consortium of 20 civil society organisations across 13 European countries. See: <https://sparkachange.eu/>

Disclaimer: This report was created with the financial support of the EU. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Climate Outreach and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EC.

## Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach is passionate about widening and deepening public engagement with climate change. Through our audience research, practical guides and consultancy services, we help organisations engage diverse audiences beyond the usual suspects. We focus on building and sustaining cross-societal support for climate action, overcoming political polarisation, and turning concern into action. We have nearly two decades of experience working with a range of global partners including government, international bodies, media and NGOs.

We'd love to hear any feedback on this resource at [info@climateoutreach.org](mailto:info@climateoutreach.org).

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**Cover photo(s):** Protest during the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference in November 2021 in Glasgow, UK. Photo credit: ANDY BUCHANAN/AFP via Getty Images

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# Executive summary

Concern about climate change is rising and across Europe younger people in particular are worried. Younger people are also expressing an interest in social justice issues. The Covid-19 pandemic, global economic disruption, the Movement for Black Lives and #MeToo have brought many social justice issues to the forefront of public debate, particularly with regard to gender and racial injustices – creating a moment of reckoning with harmful systems and reflection on how those systems have impacted societies.

The climate justice analysis brings the lens of social equity and historical responsibility to the climate debate. It recognises that climate change exacerbates existing injustices, having a disproportionately high impact on poor and marginalised people and communities and those who are least responsible for the problem. It sees climate change as a systemic problem and advocates changes to social, political and economic structures to address historical and present injustices, redistribute power and centre the people who are most affected.



In April 2021 Climate Outreach and the SPARK consortium conducted a **survey** of over 6,000 young adults aged 18–35 across six European countries. The survey explored their perceptions of and attitudes to climate justice ideas.



The topics in the survey were then investigated further in 20 in-depth **workshops** in nine European countries with adults aged 18–29. The workshop participants were nearly all politically centre or left of centre, expressed concern about climate change but were largely not deeply engaged in taking action. This audience is a particular focus of this study as they are a core audience for climate advocates. The workshop data were used to create a series of recommendations, which are presented throughout the report. They are referred to as 'concerned young adults in Europe' throughout the remainder of this report.

Fridays for Future protestors – Madrid, Spain, September 2021  
Photo credit: Alejandro Martinez Velez / Europa Press via Getty Images



## Perceptions of climate justice among young adults in Europe



The **survey** found that most young adults in Europe want to be involved in action to tackle climate change, with some willing to go to great lengths to do so. Almost one in 10 respondents said they would be prepared to break the law to tackle climate change.

The young adults responding to the survey identified global corporations and multinational companies, along with systemic causes, such as 'capitalism' and 'economic growth', as among the main drivers of climate change, above governments or individuals. A large majority (81%) agreed that we need a social transformation – changing our economy, how we travel, live, produce and consume – in order to tackle climate change.

Although most of the respondents could not define the term 'climate justice', they were receptive to core ideas when presented with them – for example, that the least responsible are the most affected and that climate change increases injustices in society. Solutions that are often seen as more radical also attracted support among the respondents: four in 10 said that climate change can only be solved if resources are redistributed from the wealthy to those who have less. Nearly three-quarters of respondents agreed that the people and communities most affected by climate change should have more say in decisions about climate solutions.

However, there were also some contradictions and gaps in their understanding of the issue. Respondents reported seeing climate change as first and foremost an environmental issue, then as a scientific/technical or moral issue, before considering it as a social justice issue. Most did not draw a connection between someone's gender or racialisation and their likelihood of being impacted by climate change.

The survey results indicate that many young adults in Europe are well aware of the need for fundamental changes to society to tackle climate change. But the findings also point to the importance of not expecting the term 'climate justice' alone to be meaningful or an effective rallying call for this audience – there is a need to explain certain key concepts clearly.

## Concerned young adults' responses to climate justice messaging



The **workshops** revealed many similarities in thinking between the survey respondents (a general selection of young adults aged 18–35) and the workshop participants (young adults aged 18–29 who are concerned about the issue of climate change and centre or left of centre politically).

These workshops helped paint a more in-depth picture of how to engage this audience. The box below highlights several important tensions in the way concerned young adults in Europe think and feel about climate justice.

- ▶ **Concerned young adults agree that climate change is a systemic problem but may struggle to know what the solutions are and to see themselves in them.**

The workshop participants agreed that environmental problems are connected to social, political and economic structures but, for many, it was harder to imagine what structural changes are needed, or what strategies could be implemented to get there. The specific solutions they proposed often revolved around how the current system might be improved and individual lifestyles changed, even when this did not match the scale of change they appear to believe is necessary.

- ▶ **Concerned young adults think the status quo isn't working and want to see big changes, but frequently feel powerless to bring this about.**

Many workshop participants conveyed a strong sense of their own powerlessness within these systems. They were motivated by the prospect of citizen-led action on climate change, and responded well to examples of this, but expressed doubts about the extent to which citizens can make big changes happen, and the ability of young people to contribute to those changes.

- ▶ **Concerned young adults care about social justice issues like racism and sexism, but don't readily connect them to climate change.**

When asked to identify which groups of people are most impacted by climate change, workshop participants talked about poverty as a major issue – for example, that poorer people or countries have fewer options in how to respond. Few spontaneously made a connection between climate change and gender and racial injustices. These results point to a gap in understanding among some young adults about how aspects of marginalisation and discrimination – such as barriers to participation and to basic rights and opportunities – are connected with climate change. Without this understanding young adults can easily reject social justice concerns as being a time-consuming side issue or distraction.

- ▶ **Concerned young adults think responsibility lies at the top but don't believe their government will do the right thing.**

Participants in this study reported that they think governments and the EU should be doing more. They saw big corporations and wealthy country governments as both culpable for harm and responsible for taking action. But they also expressed cynicism about whether these powerful actors will do what is needed. And although the workshop participants freely expressed criticism of those with a lot of wealth and power, many reacted against messaging that expressed this view – believing that blame or guilt is counterproductive to global collective action because it creates division rather than unity.

- ▶ **Concerned young adults want more balance in who has power and voice, but don't like language about taking power or resources away from anyone.**

Participants in the workshops agreed that inequality of wealth and power is a big problem, but they didn't like the sound of 'taking away' decision-making power and resources from the wealthy and powerful – responding much more positively to language around 'balance' and 'redistribution'. They also expressed the belief that communities

most affected by climate change should have more say in solutions, but didn't want this to come at the expense of technical and scientific knowledge. Some participants in the study tended to privilege technical and scientific knowledge over other forms of knowledge, and reported feeling that those who are most impacted by climate change may not have the understanding or expertise needed to contribute to solutions.

► **Concerned young adults can see that climate change has roots in the past but many want to look forward rather than back.**

Participants in the workshops could see that climate change is connected to the carbon emissions of past industrialisation, but otherwise they frequently didn't appear to have a strong understanding of the historical roots of the climate crisis. Across the 20 workshops, no one spontaneously raised the history of colonialism, and its relationship to climate change. When prompted to consider this, some acknowledged the connection and demonstrated an openness to discussing it. Others, however, were resistant to looking at the past, preferring to focus on what's happening today and the future.

► **Concerned young adults believe some actors are more culpable than others but often raised questions about the theory and reality of paying compensation for loss and damages resulting from climate change.**

The concept of paying compensation met with mixed responses. Some participants were immediately supportive, while others asked practical and philosophical questions – for instance, whether compensation would be accompanied by changes that prevent harm continuing. Some expressed concern because they didn't see the relevance to the solutions that are needed now, and worried that establishing historical responsibility could create divisions or delay action. This suggests that communicating about reparations may involve addressing some of these questions and concerns. Some young adults don't see, and perhaps have not been exposed to information about, how focusing on past events and historical responsibility can help address climate change now. Instead, they see this as a distraction.

These findings show that when a climate justice analysis is presented to them, the views of young adults in Europe who are concerned about climate change align with many aspects of that analysis. However, there are gaps in their understanding, as well as resistance to some climate justice principles.

Engaging concerned young adults in this set of issues is a complex task, and one that climate justice advocates and analysts have already made headway on. Although there is still a lot more research to do, the findings suggest that more progress in communicating with this audience about climate justice can be made by using the following principles as a guide.

# Principles for communicating with concerned young adults about climate justice



MOST EFFECTIVE APPROACH	LEAST EFFECTIVE APPROACH
<p><b>The problem is unjust political, economic and social systems</b></p> <p>Young adults have an instinct that the problem lies in systems, and identify capitalism, economic growth and consumer society as among the main drivers of climate change. Naming systemic root causes helps to make the case for systemic solutions, which they are less clear about.</p>	<p><b>The problem is about who is emitting the most carbon now</b></p> <p>Framing the problem in terms of the countries and corporations emitting carbon dioxide now can narrow people's focus to, for instance, China and India, as the main culprits, and can make it harder to talk about global systems and historical responsibility.</p>
<p><b>Bad behaviours, poorly designed systems</b></p> <p>Framing political, economic and social systems as tools designed by people also makes clear that they can be reconfigured, by choice, in the interests of human and planetary wellbeing. Damaging behaviours can then be situated within the systems that encourage or reward them. This highlights the need for systemic change and the scope that such change could open up for people to act differently.</p>	<p><b>Bad people, entrenched systems</b></p> <p>If people are bad and the systems are entrenched then all the big problems in society are intractable. Reinforcing such ideas about human nature or the natural order of things makes it harder to inspire hope in climate justice solutions.</p>
<p><b>Climate and social justice issues are inseparable</b></p> <p>The challenge is not only to build concern about climate change and social justice, but to link young adults' existing concerns about these two issues. This means being clear about the ways in which climate change is a social justice problem, and making the case that social justice is not just something that is nice-to-have but is a necessary part of developing solutions.</p>	<p><b>Climate change is an isolated technical challenge</b></p> <p>If the solution is merely a technical challenge – how to make better electric cars, for instance, or decarbonise home heating – then justice issues can be perceived as a distraction or side issue. Especially when communicated in a tone of urgency, it can trigger responses like “we simply don't have time for that”. It can also encourage young adults to privilege certain forms of knowledge (for example, western, scientific knowledge) over others (for example, indigenous knowledge).</p>
<p><b>Climate change impacts are unequal because of sexism, racism and other kinds of discrimination</b></p> <p>Young adults tend not to readily connect gender or racialisation with vulnerability to climate change. When talking about this the reasons for unequal impacts need to be made clear – for instance, by explaining how women's voices are excluded and how gendered roles and sexism limit their options. Or it can mean explaining that racist exploitation and colonialism form the backdrop of climate change impacts in some countries in the global south.</p>	<p><b>Climate change impacts some groups of people more (without explaining why)</b></p> <p>Without an explanation of the reason <i>why</i> climate change impacts some groups harder than others, young adults can fill in the gaps with partial or unhelpful explanations. Talking about impacts in the global south, for instance, can trigger responses like “it's because they're poor or less educated” and “they get harder hit because of their geography”.</p>

MOST EFFECTIVE APPROACH	LEAST EFFECTIVE APPROACH
<p><b>Discrimination and exclusions caused by sexism and racism heighten a person's vulnerability to climate impacts locally as well as globally</b></p> <p>Imagery and authentic stories can be used to show how some people – including women, non-binary, trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) – are affected more than others as a result of unequal power relations. Talking about how more women than men died during the 2003 European heat wave, for instance, and connecting this with experiences around the world, could show how this is happening on our doorstep, while helping build a sense of shared experience and solidarity.</p>	<p><b>It's just poor people in faraway countries who are more affected</b></p> <p>Young people often cite poverty as the central explanation for some groups being harder hit than others. Understanding a climate justice analysis requires a clear explanation of how structures drive poverty and inequality through discrimination and barriers to participation and to basic rights and opportunities – and how this plays out in Europe as well as in the global south.</p>
<p><b>Affected communities are agents of change and experts and leaders in their own right</b></p> <p>Marginalised groups may be unequally impacted but that doesn't mean they are passive. Communicators can share stories of people as agents, experts and first-responders. This could mean, for example, sharing the stories of collectively led actions carried out by women and indigenous people – like the contribution of indigenous land management practices to building Africa's Great Green Wall.</p>	<p><b>Affected communities are passive victims without the right kind of knowledge</b></p> <p>Depicting women as victims who need rescuing reinforces gender stereotypes. If indigenous people are portrayed as passive or silent their knowledge and leadership is undermined.</p>
<p><b>The past has led to the present situation through legacies, and continued practice of, colonialism and extraction</b></p> <p>Concerned young adults often talk more fluently about the exploitations of today than those of the past. Explaining how extraction and exploitation in the past shaped what is happening today, and framing them as root causes of the crisis, helps make the past relevant in regard to developing today's solutions.</p>	<p><b>The past is the past and is not relevant to the solutions we need now</b></p> <p>If the connection between past and present isn't made, it is easier for young adults to reject arguments about historical responsibility or solutions like reparations with responses such as "the past isn't relevant to what we do now" and "we can't hold people in the past responsible".</p>
<p><b>Reparations as a part of wider systemic solutions</b></p> <p>Concerned young adults are more likely to support reparations if they are given explanations of how they could work in practice, and how they could address system-wide problems in the present – for instance, as part of a guarantee to not repeat harms to people and nature.</p>	<p><b>Reparations as an isolated solution</b></p> <p>If the concept of reparations is presented without context or information that addresses their concerns, young adults are likely to be confused or sceptical.</p>



MOST EFFECTIVE APPROACH	LEAST EFFECTIVE APPROACH
<p><b>Rebalance and redistribute power, voice and resources fairly</b></p> <p>'Righting the balance' is a promising frame. Young adults who are concerned about climate change acknowledge that inequality of wealth and power is part of the problem and respond well to the idea that rebalancing and redistributing wealth and power can address the problems of today. This could be one way, for instance, to connect young adults with the demand for climate finance and the transfer of resources from the global north to the global south in tackling climate change.</p>	<p><b>Take away power, voice and resources from some groups and give them to others</b></p> <p>For some young people, 'taking away' is associated with the illegal expropriation of resources, of revolution or revolt, or taking away people's rights – in other words, something undemocratic or violent.</p>
<p><b>Affected communities should have a voice, both in principle and because their knowledge is valuable</b></p> <p>The idea that we all have something important to learn from people with experience of climate change is compelling. Some workshop participants pointed out the principle, which is core to a climate justice analysis, that affected people and communities also have a right to a say in decisions that affect them – emphasising that it is right in principle as well as useful in practice.</p>	<p><b>Affected communities should have a voice only because their knowledge is valuable</b></p> <p>Framing this idea instrumentally can reinforce the thinking that people should only have a say in decisions if they have something important to contribute. It can also imply that the burden is on their shoulders to solve the problem.</p>
<p><b>Young people can play an important role</b></p> <p>Concerned young adults want youth and affected communities to have more of a say on the climate crisis but at the same time frequently feel powerless to influence change. Presenting specific ways that younger people can be involved in organising and mobilising, while building a sense of solidarity between them and the groups who are most impacted by the climate crisis, could help counter this.</p>	<p><b>Young people carry the burden of responsibility on their shoulders</b></p> <p>Some young adults express resistance to the implication that they are the ones who should fix the problem, arguing that, although they can contribute, the responsibility should not be laid on them.</p>
<p><b>Power and change are achieved through long-term organising and collective action</b></p> <p>Concerned young adults respond well to examples of people and communities taking action together to bring about change. Communicators can widen young adults' idea of the scope of the scale of change that is possible with stories of popular struggle and of how social movements and citizen-led action have, over time, enabled significant change in the past, by giving examples and showing how barriers have been overcome.</p>	<p><b>Fixes rather than transformative change</b></p> <p>Despite largely understanding the problem as systemic, and wanting proportionate solutions, young adults concerned about climate change tend to propose solutions that involve fixes to markets, infrastructure, behaviours and technologies. If this tendency is reinforced, it risks dampening imagination and resolve to participate in collective action and system change.</p>

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<p><b>Transformation is possible</b></p> <p>Communicators can connect with young adults' instincts that systems are at the root of the problem and can couple this with information about the possibilities for transformation and change. The study results suggest that young adults may be more likely to respond to solutions underpinned by principles of social justice and equity that are proportionate to the scale of the problem; alongside strategies and ways to contribute to these 'big picture' solutions, particularly where those actions feel like a joint endeavour.</p>	<p><b>Too much emphasis on the problem and not enough on how to respond</b></p> <p>The goals of climate justice may feel distant and difficult to achieve, while small-scale behaviour changes may feel insufficient – both of which can lead to a sense of powerlessness. Acknowledging the scale of the task at hand may feel more authentic to younger people, but it can also lead to a sense of helplessness. Too much emphasis on the problem and on how powerful other actors or systems are, with too little emphasis on alternatives and solutions and how they can be achieved together, risks deepening young people's sense of helplessness.</p>
<p><b>Dramatic emissions reductions and socially just solutions</b></p> <p>Conveying why justice is integral to climate solutions is a significant communications task. Concerned young adults recognise that the status quo isn't working and want to see visions of a future that can provide a dignified and fulfilling life for all people, living within Earth's ecological limits. Communicators can emphasise that social and environmental justice is integral to this vision and that there's hope in building that future together.</p>	<p><b>Dramatic emissions reductions at any cost</b></p> <p>If the only goal is a particular emissions target, and it's urgent, then we need to get there by any means necessary – even at great cost to human life and liberty, and to the natural world. This framing can take young people even further away from climate justice as it implies that social justice is a distraction.</p>

Found this Executive Summary useful? [Read the full report](#) for more details on our findings and recommendations around young adults' understanding of climate change as a global justice issue.

