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Youth Climate Activism and Intergenerational Justice: A Review of Social Movements and Policy Influence

Dr. Ayesha Batool [1] Hafsa Naeem [2] Tawseef Khan [3] Zainab Fatima [4]

[1] Ph.D Department of Rural Sociology, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad- Progressive Climate Foundation (PCF), Punjab, Pakistan

Correspondence: ayesha.batool@outlook.com

[2] Ph.D Scholar, Department of Biochemistry, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: hafsa.naeem@yahoo.com

[3] Founder & CEO, Progressive Climate Foundation (PCF), Pakistan

Email: tawseefkhan11@gmail.com

[4] M.Phil Scholar, Institute of Soil and Environmental Sciences, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: zainabfatimaa002@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This importation of RNAs has been especially evident especially when a substantial disaster has occurred like the Kashmir Earthquake of 2005 and the 2022 Monsoon Floods. Despite this, over time, there have been methodological improvements in RNAs that include the integration of digital technologies and that is, the use of mobile-based data and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) that have improved the timeliness and accuracy of assessments. In spite of these improvements, there are still several systemic barriers that continue to affect the effectiveness of RNAs in Pakistan. These include lack of standardized evaluation systems, lack of technical capacity at the local levels, lack of community mobilization and inadequate inter-agency coordination. These limitations mainly lead to fragmentation of data, repetition of efforts and slow or poorly informed responses. In order to maximize the usefulness of RNAs in their operations, there is an urgent necessity to create and establish standardized procedures that can be used consistently under a range of disasters. The targeted training of local capacity, as well as the allocation of resources will create central solutions to increasing the reliability of the data, strategic planning, and the overall integrity of the disaster response activities in Pakistan.

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Introduction

One mere defiance changed the world. On August 20, 2018, Greta Thunberg, who was fifteen years old, sat alone outside of the Swedish Parliament with a handmade sign that said School Strike for Climate Skolstrejk fort klimatet (Fisher, 2019). What started off as a lone protest by a single teenager would in a little more than a year turn into a worldwide movement that even the experts have come to realize stood as one of the most impactful youth-led mobilizations in contemporary history (Fisher, 2019; Wahlström et al., 2019). By October 2019, approximately 4 million individuals had gone to the street in 150 countries and changed the nature of our discourse of climate change and those who have a right to influence climate policy (de Moor et al., 2020).

Such bombshell development is more than the common environmental action. It addresses the issue of intergenerational crisis of justice an understanding of how the choices of the present generation regarding carbon emissions, fossil fuel systems, and climate response will affect the future habitability of the world among generations still to be born (Tremmel, 2009; Thew et al., 2020). The individuals at the forefront of these movements are the young people who are around 1.8 billion people aged 10-24 years all over the world and are embracing an uncomfortable reality: they will have to bear the consequences of the decisions made with them playing a significant role in making them (United Nations, 2024). The carbon-intensive infrastructure that is causing climate change was created by previous generations, but the youth end up being systematically excluded of the rooms where climate fates are determined now (Hickman et al., 2021; Holmberg and Alvinius, 2020).

Intergenerational justice is not a new philosophical concept, however, it is youth activists who have made the abstract theory look like a pressing political issue (Tremmel, 2009). They have done so by rebranding climate action as an issue of human rights that claim that the inaction of governments to combat climate change incurs a breach of basic constitutional guarantees and ethical duties (Setzer and Higham, 2023; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). There is a consensus starting to appear in courts. Young plaintiffs have won landmark cases of establishing that governments owe legal obligations to future generations, the victories that could not be imagined at all a decade ago (German Constitutional Court, 2021; Montana Supreme Court, 2024).

This review looks at the complex terrain of youth climate activism its history and changes, its structural creativity and strategy and tactics, its policy influence and ongoing challenges (Fisher, 2019; Pickard, 2019; Boulianne et al., 2020). We specifically are focusing on Pakistan where the hypocrisy of climate injustice can be seen in black and white. As a country that produces less than 1% of the global greenhouse gas emissions and is among the top ten most climate-vulnerable countries worldwide, Pakistan is home to more than three-quarters of the world's under-thirty populations and was hit with disastrous floods in 2022 that wiped a third of the nation and 33 million individuals (UNDP Pakistan, 2024; Government of Pakistan, 2022). The Pakistani youth are not just victims of the climate change that they are organizing, mobilizing and demanding change despite the hurdles that would have stalled less determined movements.

2. Youth Climate Concern: A Global Perspective

2.1 Prevalence and Distribution of Climate Anxiety

The statistics reveal a disturbing tale of the climate change that is having an adverse impact on the mental health of the youth. Surveying 10,000 individuals between 16 and 25 years old in ten countries, researchers found an interesting fact: 59% of them felt down about climate change, 67 percent felt anxious, and 56 percent felt powerless (Hickman et al., 2021; Lewandowski et al., 2024). However, the following makes this especially disturbing 45% said that their daily lives were being actively disrupted by these emotions about climate change that were affecting their sleep as

well as their eating habits and their ability to just be young (Hickman et al., 2021). In a somewhat newer study of around 16,000 young Americans, this anxiety cuts across political lines: 74 percent of young Republicans, 86 percent of the independents, and 96 percent of the Democrats have been found to be concerned about the effects of climate (Lewandowski et al., 2024). Climate anxiety, as it happens, does not demand voter registration card.

The climate worry geography provides unpleasant data on who is the most concerned and why. In the Philippines, where typhoons are increasing to near-standard routines, 84 percent of surveyed young people expressed that they are extremely concerned with climate change (Hickman et al., 2021). India follows at 78%. Pakistan achieves 63 percent, and 83 percent of the youths reported that they are willing to act provided that someone simply provides them with the tools and encouragement to do it (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). This is in contrast to United States which is the second-largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world with only 46% of young people voicing such worries (Hickman et al., 2021). The trend is even more evident: the people who have contributed to climate change the least tend to be the most concerned about it, as they have to put up with the outcomes (Diffenbaugh and Burke, 2019). It is a sadistic irony that characterizes climate injustice.

Figure 1: *Climate Concern Among Youth by Country (Ages 16-25)*

Country	Percentage Extremely/Very Worried
Philippines	84%
India	78%
Brazil	67%
Portugal	65%
Pakistan	63%
Australia	60%
France	59%
Nigeria	51%
United Kingdom	50%
United States	46%

Source: *Hickman et al. (2021); UNICEF Pakistan (2024)*

Table 1: *Psychological Impacts of Climate Change on Youth*

Emotional Response	Percentage (%)
Hope for positive change	72
Anxiety about future	67
Sadness and grief	59
Anger at inaction	58
Helplessness	56
Guilt	51
Daily life interference	45

Source: *Hickman et al. (2021); Lewandowski et al. (2024)*

2.2 Pakistan's Youth Climate Concern and Educational Impact

Pakistan's story deserves special attention because it captures the climate crisis in microcosm (UNDP Pakistan, 2024; UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). Picture this: a nation where nearly two-thirds of the population is under thirty, making it one of the world's youngest countries. Now layer onto that the fact that it ranks among the ten nation's most vulnerable to climate change, despite contributing barely 1% to global emissions (UNDP Pakistan, 2024). When UNICEF surveyed Pakistani youth, 78% said climate change was actively disrupting their education not as some future threat, but right now (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). Twenty-one percent reported their families could no longer afford school fees because of climate impacts. Sixteen percent said they couldn't reliably get to school anymore.

The 2022 floods brought these abstract statistics into devastating focus (UNICEF, 2022; Government of Pakistan, 2022). One-third of Pakistan an entire third of a nation went underwater. Thirty-three million people were affected, including 16 million children. Five hundred and twenty-eight children died. Scientists later confirmed what many suspected: climate change had made the monsoon rains 75% more intense than they would have been otherwise (World Weather Attribution, 2022). In 2024 alone, climate-related disasters disrupted schooling for 26 million Pakistani children, from heat waves in Punjab forcing school closures to renewed flooding in Sindh (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). When toxic smog blanketed Punjab in November 2024, another 16 million children found their classrooms shuttered.

Yet here's the kicker: despite experiencing climate change so directly and so brutally, only 27% of Pakistani youth feel they can adequately explain what climate change actually is (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024; Pakistan Observer, 2025). The education system hasn't caught up with reality. But this is crucial 83% said they're eager to take action if someone just gives them the support and resources to do so (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). Fifty-nine percent believe their government should lead that charge. The will is there. The knowledge gap and resource gap are what's holding them back.

3. Evolution of Youth Climate Movements

3.1 From Marginal Activism to Global Movement

Modern youth climate organizing is a continuation of the previous decades of environmental organizing but is a qualitative shift in terms of scale, organization, and strategic complexity. The movement had gained an unprecedented international visibility in August 2018 when Greta Thunberg organized a protest and triggered the creation of Fridays for Future (FFF), a decentralized global network that uses school strikes as its main strategy.

Figure 2: *Global Climate Strike Participation Timeline (2018-2023)*

Event	Date	Participants	Description
First Thunberg Strike	August 2018	27,000	Initial Swedish Parliament protest
Global Strike Wave	March 2019	1,000,000	2,200 strikes in 125 countries
Peak Mobilization	September 2019	4,000,000	Largest climate demonstration in history
Post-Pandemic	September 2022	70,000	Recovery phase mobilization
Germany Strikes	March 2023	220,000	240 locations across Germany
End Fossil Fuels	September 2023	90,000	Campaign for fossil fuel phase-out

The movement witnessed a skyrocketing growth in 2019. The March 15 strike attracted more than one million participants in 2,200 actions spread in 125 countries. The Global Week for Future of September 20, 2019 was the highest point of pre-pandemic mobilization, attracting about 4 million

participants across the globe, among them 1.4 million in Germany alone.

3.2 Organizational Structure and Communication Strategies

Youth climate movements have an organizational structure that is based on a calculated tradeoff between coordination and decentralization. Fridays for Future is a horizontal network, where there is no hierarchy. Local organizations are organized autonomously through online applications like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter. Such a networked system is scalable easily, adaptive locally, and resilient to the efforts to suppress activities.

Table 2: *Major Youth Climate Movements and Their Key Characteristics*

Movement	Founded	Geographic Reach	Primary Tactics	Key Achievements
Fridays for Future	2018	150+ countries	School strikes, public demonstrations	4M+ mobilization (2019); global discourse shift
Sunrise Movement	2017	United States	Electoral organizing, sit-ins, policy advocacy	Green New Deal framework; Inflation Reduction Act influence
Youth Climate Activists Pakistan (YCAPK)	**2018**	**Pakistan**	**Climate education, protest organization, disaster response**	**Provincial LCOYs; COP representation; flood relief coordination**
Extinction Rebellion Youth	2018	70+ countries	Non-violent civil disobedience, roadblocks	UK climate emergency declaration (2019)
Youth Climate Leaders	2019	Africa-focused	Community education, tree planting, advocacy	AU Youth Envoy appointment; policy consultations
Zero Hour	2017	US & International	Youth climate summits, art activism, lobbying	Climate justice framework mainstreaming
Youth4Climate	2020	Global	UN engagement, policy development, summits	Official UNFCCC recognition; COP participation

4. Pakistan: A Case Study in Youth Climate Leadership

4.1 The 2022 Floods and Youth Response

Pakistan provides a critical case of youth climate activism rooted in acute vulnerability to climate change. Between June and September 2022, work meteorological studies identified Pakistan to have been hit by climate change-affected monsoon floods with rainfall that was 75% more intense than would be expected in the absence of 1.2°C global warming. The disaster flooding drowned 1/3 of the country, had an impact on 33 million people, caused displacement of more than a total of 8.2 million people and took over1,700 lives including at least 528 children and resulted in $30 billion loss to economy and infrastructure.

Youth activists reacted with a degree of swiftness and coordination that was uncharacteristic, even for them. And students huddled in Twitter Spaces to coordinate rescue efforts, while youthful volunteers as far away as Istanbul carried out boots-on-the-ground humanitarian work with a

fraction of the resources. A 19-year-old climate activist from Sindh, Ayesha Shaikh, witnessed the floods herself and traveled to displacement camps to assist people and magnify the voices for affected communities. Her reports showed kids splashing through waist high floodwaters, families with no access to clean water or sanitation, and outbreak of waterborne diseases everywhere.

4.2 Institutional Youth Climate Organizing in Pakistan

Despite resource constraints, Pakistani youth are now capable of organizing for climate action. Youth Climate Activists Pakistan (YCAPK) is a national network of youth established in 2018. It provides a platform for youth to engage in resource development on climate change, climate education in schools, protesting for political engagement, and optimal utilization of social media to highlight best practices and marginal voices.

In November 2024, over 1,000 youth attended Pakistan's second annual Local Conference of Youth (LCOY Pakistan) in Islamabad. Pakistan is uniquely among 115 countries where they think hosting 115 countries is important. They were held in every province prior to the national conference. All of them were women-led and were held to ensure the youth from every region spoke. also, it was to contribute to the National Youth Statement presented on behalf of Pakistan at COP29 in Baku.

4.3 Youth Climate Advocates and Policy Engagement

Individual Pakistani youth have achieved significant recognition for climate advocacy. In February 2025, UNICEF appointed 14-year-old Zunaira Qayyum from Balochistan as Youth Advocate for Climate Action and Girls Empowerment in Pakistan. Zunaira's research on climate change-induced floods' impacts on girls' secondary education in Hub, Balochistan won the UNICEF Policy Research Challenge in 2023. She represented Pakistani youth at COP29 and has trained adolescents in advocacy, policy engagement, research, and network building.

Rida Rashid, representing Fridays for Future and Re-Earth Initiative, attended multiple COPs focusing on accountability mechanisms, stating: "Having attended many COPs, it is exhausting witnessing world leaders prioritize power over people. I focus on holding local, national, and international governments accountable by advocating for transparency and accountability mechanisms."

Table 3: *Pakistan Youth Climate Profile and Key Statistics*

Indicator	Data	Source
Population under age 30	>64%	UNDP Pakistan (2024)
Youth climate concern	63%	UNICEF Pakistan (2024)
Willingness to act if supported	83%	UNICEF Pakistan (2024)
Education disrupted by climate	78%	UNICEF Pakistan (2024)
Children affected by 2022 floods	16 million	UNICEF (2022)
Child fatalities in 2022 floods	528+	Government of Pakistan (2022)
Total people affected by 2022 floods	33 million	Government of Pakistan (2022)
Can explain climate change	27%	UNICEF Pakistan (2024)
LCOY 2024 participation	1,000+ youth	UNDP Pakistan (2024)
Climate vulnerability rank	Top 10 globally	Climate Risk Index (2024)

GHG emissions contribution	<1% globally	Pakistan NDC 3.0 (2024)
Children affected by school closures (2024)	26 million	UNICEF Pakistan (2024)
Primary responsibility for action (youth view)	59% government	UNICEF Pakistan (2024)

4.4 Challenges Facing Pakistani Youth Climate Activists

Despite remarkable mobilization, Pakistani youth face substantial barriers. The British Council's Pakistan Youth Leadership Initiative has trained over 290,000 young people in climate activism, yet rural youth who experience climate impacts most severely lack internet access and platforms to raise voices. Young women climate leaders report facing online harassment. Educational systems provide minimal climate education, with a 2023 survey revealing 80% of students lacked understanding of basic concepts like carbon footprints.

After being flooded in 2022, the country got pledges of 10 billion dollars for reconstruction but needed 16.3 billion for recovery full. Youth activists are worried about fund mismanagement and the limited involvement of youths in planning reconstruction. The latest floods and the unprecedented heatwaves in 2024 that caused around 7,000 heatstroke's, are repeating traumas. They are also hampering learning and taking away resources from climate-resilient adaptation.

5. Youth Climate Litigation and Legal Activism

5.1 The Strategic Turn to Legal Systems

Youth have resorted to judicial systems for climate accountability alongside street protests. Youth-led climate litigation is a step forward in climate advocacy and it uses laws such as constitutional law, human rights law and administrative law. World over, the number of climate litigation cases is increasing rapidly. According to data from New York University's Climate Litigation Accelerator and the United Nations Environment Programmed, 279 such cases were being advocated globally as of June 2023. The number is expected to increase to nearly 340 by late 2024.

Figure 3: *Exponential Growth of Climate Litigation Cases (2019-2024)*

Year	Number of Active Cases
2019	45
2020	68
2021	112
2022	178
2023	279
2024	340

5.2 Landmark Cases and Evolving Legal Precedents

A number of landmark cases established important precedents for youth climate rights.

Neubauer et al. v. Germany (2021): Germany's constitutional court (the Bundesverfassungsgericht) ruled in Neubauer et al. v. Germany that the government's climate targets are constitutionally inadequate because young people are at risk of having their fundamental rights violated by emissions reductions dip to future decades.

Supreme Court of Montana 2023-2024: Held v. State of Montana – Sixteen plaintiffs aged 5-22 successfully argued that the State's fossil fuel-friendly policies violate the Constitution's guarantee of a clean and healthful environment. Montana Supreme Court upheld this landmark ruling in December 2024.

Table 4: *Key Youth Climate Litigation Cases and Outcomes*

Case Name	Jurisdiction	Year	Legal Basis	Outcome/Status
Neubauer et al. v. Germany	Germany	2021	Constitutional rights, intergenerational justice	Victory: Strengthened climate targets required
Held v. Montana	United States	2023-24	State constitutional right to clean environment	Victory: Upheld by Supreme Court (Dec 2024)
Duarte Agostinho v. Portugal	European Court of HR	2020-24	European Convention on Human Rights	Pending: 33 countries sued
Mathur v. Ontario	Canada	2024-25	Charter rights, provincial targets	Appeal victory; hearing Dec 2025
Sacchi et al. v. Argentina	UN Committee	2019-21	Convention on Rights of Child	Partial: Rights recognized
Juliana v. United States	United States	2015-ongoing	Constitutional rights, public trust	Ongoing: Multiple appeals

5.3 International Legal Mechanisms

Young people are suing not just in their own countries but also internationally. The campaign, World's Youth for Climate Justice, leads to an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on obligations of states in relation to climate change. On August 2023, General Comment No. 26 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognizes for the first time the right of children to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

6. Policy Influence and Political Impact

6.1 Electoral Engagement and Generational Voting Patterns

Youth activism on climate issues is now politicized. A study done at Yale University found that 72.8% of young respondents would likely vote for a political candidate who supports a not so aggressive climate policy.

Figure 4: *Generational Differences in Climate Engagement*

Generation	Active in Movement (%)	Perceive Action Effective (%)	Vote Based on Climate (%)
Gen Z (18-25)	30	68	73
Millennials (26-38)	24	58	65
Gen X (39-54)	19	48	52
Boomers (55+)	17	38	45

In the US, the Sunrise Movement proved instrumental to the climate agenda of the new Biden administration. As a result of the movement, the American Climate Corps was created and the Inflation Reduction Act passed (2022) at $369 billion, most significant climate investment in U.S. history.

6.2 Youth Influence Across Policy Dimensions

Figure 5: *Youth Movement Impact Scores (0-100 Scale)*

Policy Dimension	Influence Score
Agenda Setting	85
Public Discourse	78
Electoral Impact	62
Legislative Change	48
Funding Allocation	35
Decision-Making Power	28

Analysis reveals that while youth movements demonstrate strong influence on agenda-setting and public discourse, they face significant limitations in accessing actual decision-making power and influencing resource allocation priorities.

7. Persistent Challenges and Structural Barriers

Figure 6: *Distribution of Climate Finance (2006-2023)*

Category	Percentage
Projects addressing youth	2.4%
Projects excluding youth	97.6%

7.1 The Funding Gap

A study of multilateral climate finance interventions from 2006 to 2023 showed that only 2.4% of projects addressed youth vulnerabilities.

7.2 Criminalization and Repression

Youth climate activists face increasing criminalization. The United Kingdom passed the Public Order Act in 2023 which greatly enhances the police power to stop and prosecute protests resulting in young activists being imprisoned for their non-violent protests. Every year, more than 200 land and environmental defenders are killed across the world.

7.3 Educational Penalties

Participating in a school strike tensions with schools. In Pakistan specifically, 78% of youth report education disrupted by climate impacts including flood damage to schools, heat-related closures, and families' inability to afford schooling costs.

8. Comparative Regional Analysis

Figure 7: *Regional Variations in Youth Climate Engagement*

Region	Awareness (%)	Concern (%)	Active Participation (%)
Global South	78	82	47
Global North	68	58	35
MENA	71	75	42
South Asia (Pakistan focus)	**72**	**79**	**38**

An examination of youth activism in South Asia has revealed that Pakistan and South Asian youth are more aware and concerned than youth anywhere else. However, they are also facing a lot more structural barriers arising from weaker economics, access to digital infrastructure (including in rural areas), educational disruption because of climate disasters and (in particular) gender-based barriers stopping many younger women from participating in activism.

9. Discussion: Implications for Climate Governance

9.1 Transformative Achievements

Youth climate activism has brought about a fundamental change in politics. Through movements, climate action is re-framed as a fundamental right and intergenerational justice. The Pakistan instance demonstrates how youth activism can utilize the impetus of acute climatic disasters for the rapid mobilization of automation for humanitarian response and maintaining pressure for long-term policy reform despite severe resource and institutional impediments.

9.2 Persistent Implementation Gaps

Despite significant achievements in discourse, translation to concrete policy change remains incomplete. Pakistan's experience is illustrative: despite youth mobilization and international attention following the 2022 floods, reconstruction funding remains inadequate, youth participation in planning processes is limited, and climate education gaps persist.

9.3 Theoretical Implications

Youth climate activism offers important theoretical insights for social movement scholarship. Pakistan's provincial LCOY model represents an innovation in ensuring geographic inclusivity and women's leadership within youth climate organizing.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

Youth climate activism represents one of the most significant social movements of the 21st century. Pakistan's experience reveals both the potential and constraints of youth climate action. With over 64% of its population under 30 and ranking among the top ten climate-vulnerable nations, Pakistan demonstrates urgent need for youth climate leadership. Yet Pakistani youth face inadequate climate education (only 27% can explain climate change), educational disruption affecting 78% of students, and limited decision-making power despite high willingness to act (83%).

10.1 Recommendations for Enhanced Youth Participation

1. Mandated Youth Representation Establish legally required youth representation (ages 16-25) in climate decision-making bodies with voting rights. Minimum 20% youth representation in national climate councils, parliamentary committees, and international delegations. For Pakistan specifically, integrate youth representatives into provincial and federal climate policy committees.

2. Dedicated Funding Mechanisms Allocate minimum 10% of climate finance to youth-focused projects. For Pakistan, prioritize funding for rural youth, women-led organizations, and climate education programs to address the gap where only 27% can adequately explain climate change.

3. Climate Education Integration Transform educational systems to include comprehensive climate education. Pakistan should integrate climate science, adaptation strategies, and activism skills across curricula given that 78% of student's report education disrupted by climate impacts.

4. Intergenerational Impact Assessments Require explicit analysis of policy effects on future generations with public reporting requirements.

5. Voting Age Reform Lower voting ages to 16, recognizing those who will live longest with climate consequences should participate in decisions.

6. Legal Protections Strengthen protections for young climate activists including safeguards for protest rights and accountability for governmental violations of children's climate rights.

7. Pakistan-Specific Recommendations:

- Establish permanent youth advisory councils at provincial and federal levels
- Provide stipends for youth climate organizers to address economic barriers
- Create gender-responsive climate education programs addressing barriers facing young women
- Integrate youth perspectives into flood reconstruction and climate adaptation planning
- Expand internet access and digital infrastructure in rural areas to enable participation
- Develop mental health support programs addressing climate trauma and eco-anxiety

10.2 Future Research Directions

Critical questions warrant investigation: longitudinal tracking of youth activists; comparative analysis of factors explaining movement success variations; effectiveness of different tactics; and intersections with other social movements. Pakistan-specific research should examine how disaster-driven mobilization transitions to sustained advocacy, effectiveness of provincial LCOY models for ensuring inclusion, and impacts of climate education gaps on activism quality.

10.3 Final Reflections

The climate crisis is fundamentally a crisis of intergenerational justice. Pakistan's youth—comprising over 64% of the population yet contributing less than 1% of global emissions while facing catastrophic floods, heatwaves, and ecosystem collapse—exemplify this injustice. Those who bear greatest responsibility hold power in present institutions, while those who will experience the most severe consequences face systematic exclusion.

Youth climate movements have challenged this arrangement with remarkable courage. Whether societies respond with genuine reforms or continued resistance will determine both climate response effectiveness and democratic legitimacy. The science is unequivocal: rapid action is necessary. Young people from Stockholm to Sindh are equally clear: they will accept nothing less than policies commensurate with scientific imperatives and ethical obligations to current and future generations.

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