

What a Global United Climate Movement Could Fight for

The Basic Principles for Social and Political Change

What would a global, united climate movement be about? Which new rules do we need as one people on one planet?

The following outline was inspired by the cooperation across generations between the young activists of FFF and all the other climate and justice movements at the COP meeting in Madrid. It is based on the conviction that we need a broad, global, democratic popular movement which everyone can join. In this sense, the ideas go beyond those of FFF and XR, but adopt key points from them. The following proposal shares the same basis as most of these movements: what follows here spells out the Paris Agreement, to which almost all countries and parliaments have already committed themselves.

The world is burning. What we need is a global movement, political in the broadest sense. We cannot continue to watch while the Amazon rainforest is razed to produce meat for the Global North; as coal power stations are kept running in Germany and at the same time tens of thousands of jobs disappear in the solar and wind energy sector; as billions of animals are killed in Australian bushfires; as millions of people in Bangladesh, China, and Mozambique lose their homes to floods, and as Swiss banks continue to make money by investing in the fossil industry.

We need a collective global reaction, as one people on one planet, a cooperation between all movements, big and small. They can present a joint alternative to the approaches which are currently doing such damage to the world, to children and young people's futures.

What could be the core of such a social and political change, the key ideas that all people could stand behind? Ideas which would shape the foundations of our shared life sustainably, within ten or at most fifteen years, worldwide?

All movements, governments, and organisations can be measured against this framework, and they can be called upon every day to realise it – while we can work every day to contribute to it.

Overview

We should build on three pillars and two principles:

- (1) Fair global, national, and local greenhouse gas emissions budgets with action plans and legally anchored regulations which immediately bring in dramatic reductions to emissions in all sectors, rather than abstract goals such as “climate-neutral, net zero 2050”, which mean nothing in absolute numbers; so that worldwide in a few years almost no emissions are produced, because this is the only way to stay within the 1.5 and “well below 2”-degree limit. This includes fundamental protection for forests and oceans, as well as shifting to regenerative agriculture and focusing on secure plant-based nutrition rather than on animal “products”.
- (2) Local and global organisation, for example with the help of a global treaty (“Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty”), to keep fossil fuels (oil, coal, gas) in the ground; and at the same time an immediate stop to the financing and building of all fossil infrastructure, while continuously downscaling and dismantling the existing infrastructure by around 7–10 percent each year on average (different countries have greater or smaller obligations), as a reaction to the “UNEP Production Gap Report 2019” (on this, see <https://www.fossilfuel treaty.org> and Newell et al. 2018).
- (3) Resources should be provided to meet everyone’s basic needs, in the form of global basic services and a basic income, transforming ecosystems into commons. A rapid, publicly and democratically funded transformation of the energy system towards 100 percent renewables, inspired by global, national, and local scenarios from researchers such as the Stanford Group (Jacobson et al. 2019) and the group around Teske et al. (2019), which calculate such an immediate shift for 150 countries and describe it in detail. This funding plan should be combined with aid for populations who have already suffered damage and are expected to do so in the future, and who are already most affected by the climate crisis.

The following two principles of substantial democracy should apply throughout this transformation:

- (A) social justice (global, national, and local, to dismantle inequalities and injustice; Global North and South; BIPOC leadership) and equity or fairness (as stipulated in the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Climate Change) should guide every step,
- (B) leading to and based on the grassroots democratic principle of non-domination from an intersectional perspective (eco-feminist, anti-racist etc.), in relation to all areas of society (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.), with a focus on the democratisation of politics and the economy, and on creating humane social spaces, in which everyone can live a life in dignity, repairing the damaged common “fabric of integrity”.

These three pillars and two principles could produce the framework we all need so urgently, which would take the ecological and climate crisis seriously as a crisis. What does this mean in detail?

The three pillars

(1) Zero emissions budgets according to IPCC-SSR15-Scenario1 (rather than setting goals for particular years such as “climate neutrality in 2050”), including the corresponding action plans for all sectors

Every political measure should focus on the overall quantity of greenhouse gases being emitted and on reducing them drastically every year from now on, if global heating is to be reduced. And if we are to stay within the 1.5-degree threshold worldwide, only around 300 Gt CO₂ can still be emitted (from the beginning of 2021); around 45–50 Gt are emitted annually (Anderson et al. 2019). In a few years, all of this will have been used up and we will be drawing even closer to dangerous irreversible tipping points (the Arctic ice; the Amazon rainforest; permafrost; etc.); we have probably already passed some of them, with disastrous consequences (Rockström et al. 2023). Adhering to this tiny global budget (without relying on unrealistic reductions by negative emission technologies, which we do not have), means that richer states must reduce

their emissions by more than ten percent per year and reach almost zero emissions towards the end of the decade.

The budgets can be broken down to the global, national, and local level, and can become relevant as a political framework for all legislation.

This requires systemic transformation across all sectors of society within about ten years, a system change, by making standards stricter every year by several percent, for example. According to the UN research reports, this means an immediate shift to renewable energy, including massive reductions in energy usage; it means switching to mainly vegetarian (or vegan) diets and establishing regenerative, careful agriculture; it means shifting to public transport and to fossil-free modes of transport in general; it means sustainable construction with less cement; and it means approaching the political economy, the finance sector and the monetary system in such a way that the economy does not force us to exploit nature and other people (concrete measures are sketched out here under the heading “Possible policies”; see also Hickel 2021 and Raworth 2018).

By 2030, at least 30 percent of the world’s land and sea must be designated as commons through UN rulings and protected (Rockström 2020); forests must truly be preserved, “rewilded”, and expanded. Burning “biomass” cannot be classed as CO₂ neutral.

States, communities, and institutions must immediately develop such action plans for all areas and calculate budgets for emissions within each country, as well as for emissions from consumption. (Even the countries which are supposedly the most progressive, such as Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden, still do not obey emissions budgets. Plans are not transparent in terms of real emissions; emissions are calculated in such a way as to allow loopholes, often meaning that only half of the real figures are included; Thunberg 2022.)

The details of what is to be achieved are a matter of democratic discussion, following the two basic principles of fairness and non-domination (see “Possible policies”). However, this means democratically reshaping the public sphere and the definition of participation, to ensure that media and education do not primarily serve private interests, and to prevent the lobbying that damages democracy. Because richer nations have already emitted a disproportionate share of greenhouse gasses, they must – through a joint fund – contribute their fair share to ensuring that poorer countries can establish sustainable energy systems. This fair share can be calculated state by state (Anderson et al. 2020).

(2) Stopping the building, financing, and running of new fossil infrastructure, and dismantling existing structures on a globally just basis; perhaps through a global treaty analogous to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

According to the UNEP Production Gap Report, the fossil infrastructure (oil, coal, gas) we are currently building or planning to build will already make it impossible for us to adhere to the 1.5-degree limit. In the next ten years, up to double the quantity of fossil fuels permitted within the 1.5-degree limit will be extracted and prepared for burning.

That is why we need immediate political action, which could take the form of a global treaty, so that we as global citizens can stop this process in a socially just way, leave fossil fuels in the ground and mark them as “toxic”. This could be modelled on the Non-Proliferation Treaty on the production and spread of nuclear weapons. We can and should define the extraction and burning of fossil fuels (as well as the profits made from them) as toxic and potentially analogous to pressing the red button. There is already a scientifically supported proposal suggesting how this global treaty could look (Newell et al. 2019). States must implement these demands as quickly as possible and initiate a process introducing the treaty (see <https://www.fossilfueltreaty.org>). It would be even better, even if it sounds utopian, would it be to organise a global conference – representing the global population – which decides how much oil, gas and coal can be taken out of the ground, and where exactly, in a fair way; so that we can guarantee that most of it stays in the ground.

The first step in this direction is to put an immediate legal stop to the financing of the fossil industry (by large banks, pension funds, universities, etc.) and to ban the construction of new fossil infrastructure across the world.

(3) Building a renewable, global-local energy system (inspired by the Stanford Group around Jacobson (2019) and Teske et al. 2019), and creating joint global sustainability legislation which – as an expression of global democracy – provides the most important existential resources to everyone unconditionally (“global basic services/income”)

But it is not enough to stop emissions and keep fossil fuels in the ground. This can be complemented by working together to build security and to provide the most important resources for a dignified life to everyone unconditionally.

A public fund could be created, through which an immediate transformation of the global energy system can be realised (through fair shares and the idea of charging a fee for the use of ecosystems as “commons”; Dixson-Declève et al. 2022, as an example). There are already detailed calculations and plans, fully costed in terms of public funds, for the construction of a global-local renewable energy system, planned out for 150 countries, combined with calculations to improve public health (Jacobson et al. 2019; Teske et al. 2019), without relying on non-existent technologies or nuclear power. It is essential to focus on saving energy, above all among the richest ten percent of the population. This funding must be connected with aid to help countries and communities which are already affected by loss and damage caused by climate change and which will be increasingly severely affected. On this, the Least Developed Countries have themselves made concrete proposals (www.reeei.org).

So that this drastic reshaping of societies can succeed worldwide, we need existential security for everyone, particularly the workers in fossil sectors, which could be provided through unconditional basic services and perhaps a basic income (see Schmelzer et al. 2022). This can also be seen as a step towards the project of a global democracy, which treats all world citizens equally (on this and debt relief, see e.g. Fraser and Lessenich in Ketterer/Becker 2019).

The two principles

Throughout this fundamental transformation of our societies, we can be guided by two principles which both stem from the same idea. This idea is that we are all dependent on each other because we live together on a living planet, and the task is to care for this home and for each other (which also ought to be stipulated in a new version or “article zero” of the UN Charter).

(A) The principle of justice and fairness

The Paris Agreement already demands that all governments adhere to a principle of “equity” throughout their legislation. “Social justice” is also mentioned in the context of shifting to a sustainable society. All states have committed to this. This principle has a historical dimension (based on previous emissions and on colonial profits), a global dimension (of the Global North and South) and a national dimension (of unequally distributed resources).

Globally, this principle implies that richer states must contribute their “fair share” (see civilsocietyreview.org) and help poorer states both with the transition to renewable energy and with current and future loss and damage caused by the climate crisis; as well as listening to the knowledge and leadership of indigenous people. At a national and local level, for example, there must be efforts to counteract unjust distribution and unequal access to participation and the resulting inequalities in relation to CO₂ emissions.

This principle of equity or justice also means that richer countries have smaller emissions budgets than poorer ones; emissions must be stopped in these richer countries through new regulations as well as lifestyle changes, and not “bought” somewhere else. This means that geoengineering, carbon offsetting and carbon trading are not fair options. This is about real changes, not about the outsourcing of reductions. In particular, non-existent technologies for negative emissions should not be planned into calculations by any government, as is currently the case everywhere. This has already had dramatic consequences for the public understanding of the necessary emissions reductions.

The standard against which this should be measured is that of intergenerational justice (as a principle of freedom set down by the German Constitutional Court). Children are rightly demanding that the generation of those in power should finally take on responsibility.

This general principle of justice can also be understood in such a way that the MAPA communities which are especially affected by the crises should be protected the most. This goes both for indigenous populations and for BIPOC people worldwide, as well as for the poorer sectors of society and for those who live with disabilities.

(B) The humane principle of non-domination and democratisation

As we transform our societies, we can implement the fundamental principle of democratisation, which demands that we dismantle existing relationships and structural relations which rely on domination, and prevent similar ones from developing; both in relation to nature (ecocide; soil leaching; livestock farming; forest clearcutting) and in relation to other human beings. All humans should be able to meet each other on an equal footing. Research in the humanities and social sciences has provided intersectional analyses of power structures for this transformation (in relation to gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, etc., and in terms of overcoming class structures); and corresponding proposals for

how humane, democratic structures can be realised so that no one is forced to give up “connectedness” to oneself, others and nature.

All the proposed solutions for the global, national, and local transformation required should satisfy these demands. And transnational solutions (such as the problematic Green Climate Fund) can be organised in such a way that particular segments of society or individuals do not profit from transformations at the expense of others; and that structural power relations are instead dismantled. The structure of the economy and the finance sector must become sustainable and be adapted to this principle of non-domination (see the chapter on the economy). This idea thus leads to a demand for the substantial democratisation of politics and the economy, and a deepening of democracy which expands democratic participation far beyond participation in elections and involvement in political parties. This means that education also has to be organised correspondingly, and young people and science have to be given a clearer place in the collective political decision-making process across society (perhaps in the form of a climate task force).

Through this, we can turn our attention to the shared fabric of integrity, which connects all of us with each other and with nature – and which was and is damaged by colonial history, indifference and oppression.

The goal

Often, the goal is formulated as follows: this is about a dignified democratic shared life for everyone on a habitable planet. Or, in slightly more detail: it is about really working together to meet everyone’s basic needs (from nutrition, equality and housing to education and political involvement) in a way that does not exceed planetary limits (climate, biodiversity, pollution, nitrates...; see Raworth 2018; Göpel 2016; Hickel 2020). This fundamental direction – along with the humane democratisation principle outlined above, which abolishes problematic power relations – could define the direction of all policies in global, national, and local documents, and replace existing political and economic goals (especially the goal of exponential GDP growth).

That is the framework which could guide everything.

Possible policies enabling the transition to a sustainable global society

The question of how exactly this framework (the three pillars and the two principles of justice and non-domination) should then be developed in reality – this is the democratic debate which we should now be conducting in all possible arenas (in citizens’ assemblies, parliaments, media and the public sphere, and within the grassroots movements).

One proposal among others, which is emerging as common ground in the climate movement (see Hickel 2020, Petifor 2019, Göpel 2016, Hornborg 2017 and Raworth 2018, as well as Hällström 2021) would implement the three pillars (global, national, local, and perhaps individual emissions budgets; a global fossil fuel treaty and a global renewable energy system) and two principles as follows:

- It would include global (!) unconditional basic services to ensure survival beyond hunger and poverty, and possibly a basic income (through a fee for the use of ecosystems as “commons”, see Dixson-Declève et al. 2022); this would make it possible to value care work more highly, balance out power relations (gender, ethnicity etc.) and really meet the needs of all people; it would partly be tied to location so that fewer goods would have to be transported (Hornborg 2017).
- This would be combined with the introduction of “positive” money, meaning that the arbitrary power of banks and the dynamic of debt and interest would be dissolved; central banks would be run democratically and would invest in sustainable transformation. Corporations would be transformed over time into substantial democratic organisations (cooperations; various forms of shared ownership; charitable foundations; state property, and so on), which would produce goods sustainably for a circular economy, particularly so that the 100 corporations which produce most emissions worldwide can be replaced with sustainable organisations, and sustainable products are valued economically; leading to immediate democratic control over the fossil fuel sector and its phase-out.
- At the same time, a green public fund (also created from fees paid for using the “commons”) would help to develop a renewable energy system which would give people decentralised power over energy provision.
- In all sectors (building, transport, clothing, nutrition, and so on), sustainable models would replace current approaches (see e.g. the future visions

created by Scientists For Future, which sketch out climate action plans for all sectors). This goes particularly for agriculture, which UN reports have said must immediately move away from animal to plant “products” and look after the soil in the process; as well as for regenerative forestry policies, which must completely shift away from clearcutting and monocultures and no longer regard the burning of biomass as carbon neutral.

- Annual regulations can use increasing standards to reduce emissions in all areas (depending on a country’s wealth; Anderson 2019). As outlined above, it would be necessary to use fair shares to guarantee poorer countries the possibility of developing their infrastructure to enable a dignified life for everyone.

Regarding international and transnational cooperation (see the chapter on a new global order), we could establish a form of convivialism which would conceptualise and facilitate security and peace in a new way. An “article zero” could be added to the UN Charter, describing us as an interdependent population living on an earth which we must all look after together, with all the consequences of that for stewardship of the “commons” (Dixson-Declève et al. 2022: “Earth4AAll”) and for global citizenship rights. Security should be redefined in existing documents and realised through peaceful means, and the Security Council should be reshaped on a democratic basis. The General Assembly could be extended with a “second chamber”, a Global People’s Assembly which would be a grassroots democratic reflection of populations and would pay particular attention to children, non-humans and future generations, as well as incorporating scientific knowledge about the crises, and thus expanding formal democracy with a substantial crisis task force, which would protect people and not only states, and therefore oversee the implementation of the Paris Agreement. This structure of a “second chamber” (citizens’ assemblies led by scientists who would pay attention to planetary limits and to the needs of all, as well as to responsibility for future generations, children, and non-humans) could also be adopted by local and national parliaments (see Pelluchon 2019).

Regarding the health and education sectors (see the chapter on education), the result of this is that in terms of curricula, teaching methods and research, we must emphasise and investigate what has been defined here as spaces of integrity, “being in contact”, and relating sustainably to the world. This involves seeing humans as embodied social beings with imaginative abilities, who live in problematic power relations with each other and with nature. Those power relations can be replaced with democratic relationships: so that education it-

self becomes transformative and regenerative, centring care and the competences and knowledge (which may be non-academic or indigenous) that enable an understanding of the crises and the development of a sustainable society for all students and teachers. Educational institutions (and health institutions) can thus become places where substantial democracy is practised and lived; they can change their institutional logic of competition, becoming cooperative places which contribute to the societal transformation towards a global, sustainable convivialism (McGewon/Barry 2023; Raffoul 2023). One possibility to achieve this could be by establishing a “centre for sustainability” at every educational institution, which explores this new sustainable way of being in the world and makes it accessible for curricula, teaching methods, research, and institutional change.

This means that as we shape our values and culture, a relationship with nature emerges which defines freedom in a new way (see the chapter on democracy): no longer following John Locke and defining integrity as the guarantee for abstract freedom on the basis of property rights, which in turn means the power to dispose of property, even in relationships of domination and abuse. Instead, freedom can now be understood as the enabling of integrity, the collective repairing and opening up of democratic relationships on an equal footing, as a new, structurally relational concept of democracy, which is complementary to the concept of human rights, and is focused on the democratic abolition of domination in relationships (gender, ethnicity, class, etc.), and on the caring, humane contact which becomes possible through that.

Such measures would correspond to the Paris Agreement. But there are certainly also other scenarios which would match the criteria of the framework. The central step is the anchoring of the framework in legislation and the creation of democratic forums which can discuss how it should look in detail.

The movement

The populations of this living planet could stand together for these changes as a global democratic political movement which not only addresses all governments directly, but also represents the prototype for a global democracy. The demands of the three pillars could be applied to all levels, from the local to the global. They provide a standard against which we can measure the political rules of governments, parties, institutions, movements, and the relevant actors in society, and correspondingly allow us to protest against the status quo.

As a framework – better than a list of specific policies, or conversely, a list of general demands – they set out what can be done immediately (for instance, stopping the building and financing of all new fossil infrastructure) and at the same time offer a long-term compass.

However, implementing them requires quite ordinary people “like you and me” to begin to rebel, and not let themselves be misled by talk of “climate neutral net zero emissions 2050” – which is far too late for richer countries. The governments of states such as Switzerland, Sweden, and Germany are miles away from the transformation sketched out here. Let alone the regimes in China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. If we continue as the states with their NDCs (national reduction plans) are proposing, the young people who are now striking will live in a world which is two or three degrees warmer when they are older. A world which is hell for billions of people and would remain so.

We need an uprising of the hesitant and the fearful. We need new collective political rules, and for that we need a united movement. Worldwide.

The methods

In order to make this new framework (three pillars, two principles) a reality, to take the crisis seriously and really change politics worldwide, a spectrum of methods can be used.

Three processes can be coordinated. One of them is the development of the “emergency brake” function which is exemplified so clearly and so well by FFF and XR. We cannot allow the fossil machinery of society simply to continue as it is. In order to bring about real change, school strikes are one excellent method; blocking the main squares in different countries is another. Civil disobedience is legitimate; it exists as a democratic tool (Chenoweth/Stephan 2012). Historically, the best effects have been achieved by massive, non-violent blockades and protests in the centres of power, lasting for days.

It is crucial for the movements themselves to practise and organise substantial democracy in an inclusive way. That also applies to the relationship between the generations: the welfare of children must have priority; we must pay attention to unequal power relations. (Meanwhile, small organisations run “top-down” with enormous financial means can damage and divide not only society, but also the movements. The aim can never be to delegate activism only to the professionals.)

The second task is to draw attention to what is needed now in practical terms. Climate strikers and Scientists For Future are working on “visions of the future” which can be implemented immediately and would enable emission-free, fair societies by the beginning of the 2030s; these are shaped by a systemic thinking which does not simply list one hundred proposals as a catalogue of demands.

However, not only researchers, but all people as experts in their areas of work (Workers, Architects, Teachers, Economists, Designers, Doctors, and Nurses – united as People For Future) can immediately set out to contribute concrete ideas and actions to this transformation, and to report on their work and share it with others as part of the movement.

So that this can happen, we need a continually united movement which everyone can join. That is the third strand: this includes spreading knowledge about this shared framework (with the three pillars and two principles), so that all people can work for it in their specific local and global contexts. One implementation could be to create centres in every school and university, in every village and town, where all dimensions of substantial democracy are explored, and which can also serve as meeting places for movements.

And this is perhaps what is now needed most: the awareness that this is a crisis and that we need crisis regulations, meaning a new framework and action plans. This could be the way for us to ensure together, globally, that the rainforest is protected, that oil fields are not built in the Arctic, that existing coal power stations stop running and are no longer financed, and that in the same process a humane, sustainable, just society develops, in which all people can lead a dignified life, because we cooperate to provide and share resources to meet basic needs and repair the damage of the past (regarding gender, ethnicity, etc.; racism, colonialism). That is why those who are most affected by the ecological and climate crises, often people in the Global South and BIPOC people, should have the leading roles in this movement, while the biggest changes must affect the richest in the Global North.

That is what we can stand up for now, peacefully, together.

