

A multi-level analysis of youth climate activism in South Korea

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Abstract

Younger generations in South Korea are increasingly concerned about environmental issues, while youth climate activism is one of the fastest growing social movements, engaging formal and informal politics at multiple levels. Among others, Youth4Climate Action, a Korean youth climate movement group, has initiated climate change litigation and presented its actions at a side-event of the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. This chapter precisely aims at analyzing the recent environmental dynamics among younger generations in South Korea. The study focuses on how Korean youth climate activists are connected within and beyond national borders. Their multi-level dynamics are analyzed through the lens of social network building. This study sheds light on the developing networks of younger generations' environmental movements and on how national dynamics shape and are shaped by global ones. The recent phenomena in South Korea show that young generations are adopting environmentalism as part of their identity.

Keywords: Korea, youth climate movement, Generation MZ, social network, multi-level network analysis

List of Acronyms

COP	Conferences of the Parties
COY	Conference of Youth
FFF	Fridays for Future
GEYK	Green Environment Youth Korea
LCOY	Local Conference of Youth
NGO	non-governmental organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Introduction

Climate change is referred to as one of the greatest challenges to humankind in the twenty-first century. Efforts to mitigate greenhouse gases, the main cause of climate change, are increasing at all policy levels: the global, regional, national and local levels. Other environmental degradation phenomena such as plastic pollution and biodiversity loss are threatening our socio-ecological systems.

As a response to such threats, interest in environmental protection is growing all over the world, including in South Korea (hereafter Korea). A 2022 Korean magazine survey indicated that Korean females in their 20s have the highest level of climate change sensitivity and of power of execution to solve it (Kim, 2022). While it is debatable whether the whole Korean younger generation is more concerned about climate change than older generations, their presence in environmental discussions is more visible than ever before.

Youth climate activism is one of the fastest growing social movements in Korea. Korean young people joined the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement initiated by Greta Thunberg in 2018. Youth 4 Climate Action, a Korean branch of FFF, filed a lawsuit in 2020, arguing that inadequate Korean governmental climate action violates constitutional rights. Kim et al. (2021) identified 67 youth climate organizations in Korea as of July 2021. Among them, 27 organizations are independent youth-led organizations, followed in number by youth branches of existing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (20), university students' clubs (15), and educational/training programs for university students (15).

The Korean young generation attention to environmental issues is now also reflected in the entertainment sector, a major economic sector in Korea that particularly targets young people. For example, in 2021, one of the most famous K-pop groups, BLACKPINK, produced YouTube videos to support action during the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). TV entertainment shows involving celebrities who promote low-carbon lifestyles or veganism have been produced in the same year (Jang, 2021).

Such increasing environmental concerns of Korean youth come with a stark contrast with the low level of priority of environmental matters in Korean politics. Korea is one of the largest emitters of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and the Korean government has been slow in carbon reduction (Climate Action Tracker, 2021). The country's environmental policy has been severely impeded by the developmentalist discourse since the 1970s, which implied that economic growth had to be prioritized over environmental protection by the state as well as by the general public (Cho, 2003). Korea's fast economic development in the late-20th century is a pride of many Koreans and part of their national identity (Kim & Park, 2003), whereas environmental movements have been often regarded as radical groups until recent years.

While youth could be seen as a new driver for climate and environmental policies in Korea, few studies exist on this topic. In addition to the recentness of this phenomenon, the language divide contributes to this knowledge gap. Kim et al. (2021) have produced very interesting research in Korean on the social networks of the Korean youth climate movement, analyzing the interactions of national youth organizations on Instagram, an online social media platform. This chapter is an attempt to build on such analyses of youth in Korean academia, adding a multi-level perspective and presenting the current status of the Korean youth climate movement to a broader research community.

This chapter focuses more precisely on the network strategies used by the Korean youth climate movement across different levels, including online/offline platforms, to question the Korean situation, as well as the broader impact of young people on environmental politics. Young people are expected to build social ties more easily (Saunders, 2007) and networks are the essential part of social movements. Diani (2000: 387) defines social movements as “networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues.” Network analysis enables to study actors within preexisting networks of collective action, but also to assess their capacities to create new networks/linkages to broaden social movements (Diani, 2002).

Methodologically, networks can be studied quantitatively or qualitatively. While it is often believed that network analysis involves heavily mathematical tools, qualitative analysis is also possible to identify and reveal the meaning of social ties (Godet & Orsini, 2021; Diani, 2002). Following such research line, this study is based on qualitative research methods.

In a first step, we investigated, in January/February 2022, Instagram using keywords (such as climate change and climate crisis, in Korean) to identify Korean youth climate organizations. Instagram is one of the most popular and influential social media platforms among young people (Molder et al., 2022), including young Koreans, featured by its focus on visual contents. In a second step, we contacted such organizations and conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with 16 interviewees. Among them, 14 were effective members of the identified youth climate organizations, and 2 were professionals working in the environmental field we identified as important informants (one is an environmental educator with 15 years of experience and the other a journalist working at an environment-specialized online newspaper in Korea). The interviews were conducted online, in Korean (see Annex 1 for the list of interviewees) and included questions on the identities, horizontal and vertical networks of Korean youth climate activism (see Annex 2 for the list of questions).

In a third step, we searched Korean youth participants within the database of the Youth Earth projectⁱ to find information about Korean participation in international climate change negotiations. This enabled to identify 66 additional actors and/or activities.

On this basis, this chapter is organized into three parts. Part 1 presents the overview of major youth climate organizations currently active in Korea. Part 2 presents their horizontal network building strategies. Part 3 analyzes their international, regional, and local network building strategies. Finally, the discussion and conclusion section explores the particularity of Korean youth climate activism.

1. Profile of Korean youth climate activism

Defining Korean youth climate activism

Before presenting Korean youth climate activism, a definition of youth is in order. Such definition varies because youth is a relational concept, and age is socially constructed in specific historical and cultural

contexts (Wyn & White, 1997; quoted from Collin, 2015). In Korean language, the English word ‘youth’ can be translated into two similar words: *cheongsongyeon* (청소년) and *cheongnyeon* (청년). According to Korean law, *cheongsongyeon* refers to the population between 9-24 years old (Framework Act on Youth, 2020) and *cheongnyeon* refers to the population between 19-34 years old (Framework Act on Youth, 2021).

In Korea, youth generations have several other titles. Those in their 20-30s as of 2022 are often called the Generation MZ, a compounded word that refers to Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000) and Generation Z (born between 1995 and the early-2010s). The Generation MZ is understood as the population that holds different consumption and communication patterns compared to older generations: they prefer to buy products in line with their values and possess high digital and IT literacy. Also, they are expected to be more active in expressing their views and in interacting with others through social media (Lee & Kim, 2021; Shon et al. 2021). While its age range is broad, the term Generation MZ is commonly used in Korean society, particularly for communication and business marketing strategies (Shon et al. 2021). Alternatively, young people are called ‘*mirae-sedae* (미래세대), meaning ‘Future Generations’. There is no specific age range agreed for this term, but Seo (2014: p. xi) defines it as: “minors including the unborn who cannot represent their own interest and rights through formal institutions at present.”ⁱⁱ

In this study, we focus on Korean youth climate-related NGOs. We first searched on Instagram Korean organizations with the two keywords ‘climate change’ and ‘climate crisis.’ We then selected within them climate-related organizations that had youth (*cheongsongyeon* or *cheongnyeon*) in their names or that had youth-related contents, thanks to the concepts identified above. 22 organizations were identified. Among these, we selected the organizations that were still active online and that had more than 500 followers on Instagram as of February 2022. As a result, eight organizations were identified and selected for this study. While not an exhaustive list, Table 1 presents these major Korean youth climate organizations, and therefore the ones that are more likely to engage at different policy levels through networks.

[Table 1] Youth-led climate organizations in Korea (having more than 500 followers on Instagram as of February 2022)

General characteristics of Korean youth climate activism

Table 1 shows that Korean youth climate organizations are relatively ‘young’. Five out of eight organizations were created after 2018. The other three organizations were established between 2013-2016, but interviewees from those organizations explained that interest for their activities has risen sharply since 2020. They attributed this increase to different factors including the global FFF movement, extreme weather events in Korea, and the coronavirus pandemic (see below).

Half of the identified organizations do not have their own website, but use several social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Naver blog, KakaoTalk Open Account, Podcast, and

Clubhouse. Particularly, they update their Instagram accounts very regularly and other social media less frequently than Instagram. These other social media platforms are therefore used rather as supplementary channels to Instagram. All interviewees from these organizations explained that their activities have been mostly organized online since 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Membership of these organizations varies from 6 to 400, with flexible membership criteria regarding age. In practice, however, members of the organizations are mostly in their 20s, and many of them are university or college students, with two organizations focusing on recruiting their members specifically at university (University Students' Climate Action and Ecoroad). None of these youth climate organizations receive regular sponsorship: they operate out of voluntary work with some of them receiving project-based funding by applying for funding programs. The majority of their members are female, residing in Seoul or in the Gyeonggi Province near Seoul.

All organizations operate to tackle climate change, but their discourses and strategies are diverse. Hashtags on social media often reflect the main discourses of their users. In their Instagram accounts Korean youth climate actors emphasized different hashtags. For example, while Youth Climate Emergency Action uses hashtags related to anti-coal protests and anti-green growth, Ecoroad frequently uses hashtags on waste reduction and veganism. In addition, some organizations prefer direct action including civil disobedience (e.g., Extinction Rebellion Korea and Youth Climate Emergency Action), while others promote behavioral changes among citizens and international cooperation (e.g., Ecoroad and GEYK). We develop below their preferred modes of action.

Main modes of action of Korean youth climate activism

Youth participation in formal politics: Among the Korean youth climate organizations identified, three (Big Wave, Youth 4 Climate Action, and GEYK) have been involved in the Korean Presidential Committee on Carbon Neutrality (Presidential Committee on Carbon Neutrality, 2021). This committee was established in May 2021 for enhancing the participatory process of climate policy. However, Youth 4 Climate Action dropped out from the committee three months later, claiming it to be 'undemocratic' and biased in favor of the industry (Youth 4 Climate Action, 2021). A local youth climate group, Busan Climate Guardians, had rejected the invitation to join the committee for the same reason (Kim et al., 2021).

Youth participation in contentious politics: Several Korean youth climate organizations are active in initiating protests against the government or corporations. Youth 4 Climate Action has organized six demonstrations between March 2019 and October 2021. In February 2021, the Youth Climate Emergency Action carried out a non-violent direct action against Doosan Heavy Industries & Construction Co., Ltd., spray painting the company's logo in green. Their protest was to oppose the company's involvement in coal-fired powerplant construction in Vietnam (Kim, Han Sol, 2021). In May 2021, one of the Youth Climate Emergency Action members went on a hunger strike to demand more

fundamental change in governmental climate policy (Choi, 2021a). Also, several Extinction Rebellion Korea activists protested in the venue of the 2021 P4G (Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030) Climate Summit, where world leaders discussed about green growth, criticizing the international conference for ‘Green Washing’. In this context, several Korean youth climate activists refused the invitation to the P4G conference because they did not want to collaborate with a government that continued coal-fired powerplant construction.

Climate trial led by youth: Another important activity mentioned during the interviews has been the March 2020 climate trial. 19 young people from Youth 4 Climate Action filed a constitutional appeal in front of the Korean Constitutional Court. They argued that governmental plans for greenhouse gas emission reduction were inadequate, therefore violating their rights to: (i) a clean and healthy environment, (ii) equality, and (iii) life (Kim, 2021). While the Constitutional Court had not taken its decision, the youth climate activists filed an additional appeal in February 2022, arguing that the Korean Framework Act on Carbon Neutrality brought into effect was inadequate for protecting future generations’ rights (Cho, 2022). The youth plaintiffs claimed that greenhouse gas reduction by 35 percent by 2030 compared to the 2018 level could not prevent global warming.

Online mobilization: Korean youth climate organizations use various channels to raise public awareness on climate change. Besides publicizing their activities, the organizations actively produce online contents such as international climate policy news, useful tips for reducing wastes, or vegan recipes on social media platforms. For example, GEYK publishes newsletters and hosts a room for discussion on Clubhouse; BigWave and Guardians of Climate produce podcasts; and Youth 4 Climate Action runs a YouTube channel.

2. Horizontal Network building strategies of Korean youth climate activists

Communities and diversification

While youth climate activism has often been treated as a single social movement, recent studies show the heterogeneity of youth climate actors (Thew et al., 2020; De Moor et al., 2020). Kim et al. (2021)ⁱⁱⁱ identified eight different communities among the 255 organizations related to Korean youth climate activism, on the basis of their Instagram activities. Individuals that work at more than one organization and discursive similarities are found to be the main links among these communities (Kim et al., 2021). In their analysis, University Students’ Climate Action, BigWave, GEYK, and Ecoroad are part of the same community; and Extinction Rebellion Korea and Youth Climate Emergency Action are part to another community. Youth 4 Climate Action and Guardians of Climate are found in two other communities.

Individuals and organizations are also engaging in collaborations across the communities identified by Kim et al. Among our interviewees, one activist is involved in the Extinction Rebellion Korea and the Guardians of Climate, and one activist is involved in the Extinction Rebellion Korea and the Revolution

Labor Party. Minji Yoon from the Youth Climate Emergency Action highlighted that there are many activists in her organization who also work at other social or environmental organizations. While diverse actors have recently joined Korean youth climate activism, fragmentation among the organizations has not been observed yet. Instead, youth organizations have tried to amplify their voice in the policy making process through making transversal alliances, as explained below.

Collaboration among Korean youth climate organizations

Korean youth climate organizations are increasingly networking with other youth organizations through co-organizing events or campaigns (Kim et al. 2021). We asked interviewees to mention the three organizations they work more closely with. As presented in Table 2, they mostly referred to their Korean youth climate organizations fellows, i.e., Youth Climate Emergency Action (four times), Youth 4 Climate Action (three times) and BigWave (three times). Interestingly, Guardians of Climate and Extinction Rebellion Korea, which were barely mentioned by other organizations, pointed that they work closely with animal rights organizations. Ecoroad was also not referred as a closest organization by others, but they work with other youth climate organizations through a common initiative called Plan 0.

[Table 2] Closest organizations or initiatives of Korean youth climate organizations mentioned by interviewees

Among several initiatives co-organized by Korean youth climate organizations, the 2040 Climate Neutrality Scenario is the one that gathered the majority of the studied organizations. This scenario was initiated in August 2021 by GEYK, BigWave, and the Youth Climate Emergency Action, joined later by Ecoroad and University Students' Climate Action. Unsatisfied by the level of ambition of the Korean Framework Act on Carbon Neutrality, these youth groups created their own scenario for Korea to achieve 'climate neutrality' by 2040 and submitted it to the Presidential Committee on Carbon Neutrality. They argued for speeding up carbon reduction and achieving climate neutrality ten years earlier than the committee's goal, which is carbon neutrality by 2050. Youth used the term 'climate neutrality' instead of 'carbon neutrality' to indicate their strong demand for net-zero emissions of all greenhouse gases. They argued that a more ambitious goal for the Korean government would give more time for action for less developed countries, that have not reached their carbon emissions peak yet. For Korea, they demanded ending the operation of all coal powerplants and ending sales of internal combustion locomotives by 2030, to achieve 'climate neutrality' by 2040. They also asked that carbon reduction efforts not be dependent on uncertain future technologies such as carbon capture, utilization and storage. Instead, they required fundamental changes within the socio-economic systems (GEYK et al., 2021a; GEYK et al., 2021b). Their proposed scenario was not reflected in the presidential committee's 2050 carbon neutrality scenario, but it was included as an appendix.

After completing their submission of the 2040 Climate Neutrality Scenario, the three Korean climate youth organizations which had launched the initiative created a network called ‘Plan 0 (Plan Zero)’ to continue collaboration. Plan 0 asks for: (i) making carbon emissions ‘net-zero’; (ii) giving up fossil fuels; and (iii) nullifying ‘youth washing’ in the Korean climate sector (Plan 0, 2022).

Networking beyond youth organizations

Korean youth climate activists have participated in campaigns organized by other national environmental or climate movement groups. BigWave, Guardians of Climate, Youth 4 Climate Action, Youth Climate Emergency Action, University Students’ Climate Action and GEYK are currently the members of the Climate Strike Korea campaign. This campaign began in September 2019 with the first global climate strike and has now more than 300 NGOs as members (Climate Strike Korea, 2020). Also, Youth 4 Climate Action, GEYK and BigWave joined the Beyond Coal Campaign, organized by environmental NGOs in September 2020, which demanded complete phase-out of coal powerplants by 2030 as well as a just transition (Beyond Coal, 2020). About a year later, Extinction Rebellion Seoul initiated the ‘Task Force for dissolution of the Presidential Committee on Carbon Neutrality’ together with three other climate justice and human rights groups (Climate Justice Forum et al., 2021). This initiative was dissolved in December 2021 but developed into the Climate Justice Alliance for System Transition in order to broaden the scope of the movement towards climate justice (Task Force for dissolution of the Presidential Committee on Carbon Neutrality, 2021).

Studying Youth 4 Climate Action discourses, Choi (2022) points out that youth activists frequently experience age discrimination when working together with conventional environmental NGOs that they see as actors too close to the political game. Such perspective was developed into a discourse according to which youth (particularly, *cheongsongyeon*) is discriminated and invisible in Korean society (Choi, 2022). Based on this experience, many Youth 4 Climate Action campaigns have been aimed at asking for the transformation of a broader political system that is unfair to youth.

During our interviews, however, we heard more positive perspectives on conventional environmental NGOs, although Korean climate youth organizations were aware of challenges. As explained by Hajong Kim from the University Students’ Climate Action, “it is a little difficult to collaborate with conventional environmental organizations but there is common sense among us [youth] that ‘we should try.’ We sometimes feel that young people are secondary participants when we work with them. Such attitude towards youth cannot only be found in the governmental institutes or the National Assembly, but also in civil society” (H. Kim, personal communication, 21/02/2022).

All the interviewees agreed that more solidarity between Korean youth climate actors and other social movements’ actors such as labor unions, feminists, and animal rights advocates is the way forward. Many youth climate organizations are already active in networking with human rights or youth rights groups. For example, for the presidential election in March 2022, several youth groups made a coalition

to demand pledges for younger generations to the candidates. Extinction Rebellion Korea and Youth Climate Emergency Action joined an alliance of youth organizations, the Youth Forum for System Transition, in August 2021 (Youth Forum for System Transition, 2021). Many also turn to transnational collaborations as Part 3 presents.

3. Vertical Network building strategies of Korean youth climate activists

Vertical networking refers to collaboration or cooperation across different political levels, i.e., international, regional, and local levels. We investigate those different political levels one by one.

International level networks

At the international level, many climate-relevant activities initiated by youth are associated with YOUNGO, the youth constituency to the UNFCCC^{iv}. YOUNGO represents the youth voice of those under 35. It is present at all official events of the UNFCCC, such as the COP, and organizes various campaigns and events. Among others, YOUNGO hosts the Conference of Youth (COY), which is held back-to-back to each UNFCCC COP since 2005.

According to the interview with Sun Ryul Kim, GEYK is the only Korean youth climate organization member of YOUNGO as of February 2022. Since 2014, 2-5 members of GEYK have participated in COYs and COPs through their partnership with 350.org, an international climate movement organization based in the United States. Their main activity at those conferences has been to present Korean youth's actions on climate change during side events^v. For these events, they have been collaborating with the Korean government, organizing their events at the Korea Pavilion during the COPs. In 2021, two representatives of GEYK participated in COP26 as Korean governmental delegates.

Moreover, GEYK regularly co-organizes side events at COYs and COPs with other youth climate organizations from East Asia, namely the China Youth Climate Action Network, Climate Youth Japan, Taiwan Youth Climate Coalition, and CarbonCare InnoLab from Hong Kong (GEYK, 2020). Their events focus on the dialogue among East Asian youth organizations and the introduction of their activities.

Other Korean youth actors have participated in the COPs to the UNFCCC as early as 2000, but outside the Korean youth climate organizations identified in this chapter. Indeed, some of them joined through conventional environmental NGOs such as the Korean Federation for Environmental Movement and the Korea Green Foundation. Others joined through business associations or universities including the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Korean Business Council for Sustainable Development, and Korea University. Also, the Korean National Assembly Forum on Climate Change has been sending university students to the COPs as part of their educational program (National Assembly Forum on Climate Change, n.d.). Students from the National Assembly often organized performances at COPs to increase climate awareness but again in partnership with the Korean delegation rather than with other youth climate organizations.

Several Korean youth climate actors, while not working with international homologues, have been inspired by them. Youth 4 Climate Action Korea started its actions following the FFF movement, and it is now working closely with the global FFF movement. The constitutional lawsuit initiated by the Youth 4 Climate Action is also in line with the global climate litigation movement which followed the success of climate cases in the Netherlands. Another group inspired by international activism is Extinction Rebellion Korea. One of its members, Seorin Gwak, participated in the demonstrations of the COP26 Coalition, a UK-based civil society coalition organized in parallel to COP26. According to them, these common actions helped the newly-organized Extinction Rebellion Korea learn about the global climate justice movement.

Regional level networks

Regional level networks are also developed by Korean youth climate organizations. Occasions to network at the regional level include the Local Conferences of Youth (LCOYs) and protests against coal-fired power plants.

LCOYs are held at the national level by YOUNGO member organizations to enhance awareness on climate change and youth participation. LCOY have been organized around the world since 2014 and the number of LCOYs varies by year (YOUNGO, n.d.). During the 2020 LCOY hosted by GEYK, GEYK co-organized the Asia Climate Rally 2020 collectively with 10 other Asian youth climate groups including Klima Action Malaysia and SG (Singapore) Climate Rally. GEYK also participated in the regional COY11 for East Asia held in Tokyo following the invitation by Climate Youth Japan (GEYK, 2016)

Since 2020, common regional action is taking the format of protests against Korean corporations' coal-fired powerplants projects. In 2020, the Korea Electric Power Corporation announced its investment plan for two coal-fired powerplants in Indonesia and one powerplant in Vietnam, Vung Ang 2 (KEPCO, n.d.). The same year, Samsung C&T also decided to confirm its financial support for the Vung Ang 2 coal-fired power plant (Choi & Choi, 2020). Several youth climate organizations have taken actions against these coal-fired powerplant projects, requesting cancellation of the projects. Youth 4 Climate Action held a press conference in 2020 in front of the Samsung headquarter. The Youth Climate Emergency Action protested against the Doosan Heavy Industries & Construction Co., Ltd. that collaborated for the Vung Ang 2 powerplant construction in February 2021 (Kim, Han Sol, 2021). They also organized the Korea's Parade 4 Greenwashing event in May 2021, together with several Indonesian environmental (youth) organizations (Extinction Rebellion Youth Indonesia, 350.org Indonesia, and Pena masyarakat), the Vietnamese climate organization CHANGE, and several activists from Vietnam (Hang Tran Thi Thanh and Dzung Hoang) (Kim et al., 2021). In October 2021, GEYK produced a short documentary film on air pollution caused by coal-fired powerplants in Jawa, Indonesia, in collaboration with university students in Indonesia and with 350.org Asia. This film released on YouTube targeted

Korean citizens to make them aware of Korean companies' overseas investments in fossil fuels (GEYK, 2021).

Sub-national level networks

In Korea, most youth climate activities are concentrated in Seoul due to the centralized political system of Korea. Major political institutions including the Presidential Office, the National Assembly, and the Constitutional Court, as well as major media and corporations are located in Seoul. The city also has the largest young population in the country due to the concentration of major universities and corporations. By contrast, many towns except Seoul, the Gyeonggi Province (the suburb area of Seoul), and a few large cities are suffering from aging population as well as population decrease (Choi, 2013). These issues resonate within environmental movements, leading to growing dependency on centralized movements from Seoul.

While the networking activities are sparse at the sub-national level, issue-oriented cooperation occurs among youth climate activists, particularly in the Gangwon Province where the Gangneung coal-fired powerplant is under construction as of 2022. Another controversial environmental issue is the construction plan of the Gadeokdo New Airport in Busan. The Youth Climate Emergency Action and Busan Climate Guardians hosted a press conference in February 2021, demanding the cancellation of the new airport construction plan (Choi, 2021b).

Several interviewees mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic brought substantial membership changes. Following the increased usage of online platforms, youth climate organizations have seen their membership broadening to those who do not reside in Seoul or its suburbs. Such changes may possibly lead to creation of more sub-national networks among Korean youth climate activists in the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

Korean youth and the climate movement

No consensus emerged among the youth climate activists interviewed for this study on the question of whether Korean youth are more interested in environmental issues than older generations. The number and size of youth-led climate organizations have indeed increased in the last few years as confirmed by all the interviewees. Many emphasized, however, that the general interest for carbon emissions' reduction has increased within Korean society, mentioning several factors behind such change. One explanation is that record heat waves (in 2018) and floods (in 2020), increased environmental awareness. Another explanation relies on a governmental change of policy. In October 2020, then president Moon Jae-in declared that Korea would aim at carbon neutrality by 2050. The same year, the Korean Green New Deal initiative, including a 73.4 trillion KRW investment (approximately 54.3 billion EUR), was announced as a major recovery plan for the economy after the coronavirus pandemic (D'Ambrogio, 2021). The business sector has swiftly followed this new policy which comes along with large investment. Such mainstreaming of climate change and carbon neutrality policy resulted in more

exposure to climate change issues for the general public. As a consequence, environmental protection does not seem to be regarded as radical and anti-capitalistic anymore. In contrast, active attempts to solve environmental degradation problems have emerged, as non-action would result in more damage and a greater loss of capital (Anonymous, personal communication, 14/02/2022).

In this context, why have climate movements based on youth initiatives gained more attention? Two activists from Youth 4 Climate Action explain that the youth climate movement has probably earned greater attention from the media due to its newness. Protests that involved school strikes have been interpreted as the distinctive feature of the Generation MZ. But reality is different, the interviewees said. Most young people are still rather concerned about issues related to their immediate future such as college entrance exams or employment. It is true that climate change is now regarded as “common knowledge if you are young” (Yoon, H., personal communication, 22/02/2022), but it does not necessarily mean that all youth act on climate change issues.

Another feature of the Korean youth climate movement is its higher share of women. Our results are in line with the aforementioned survey result presenting women in their 20s as key actors for climate change in Korea (Kim, 2022). This tendency is being observed globally: De Moor et al. (2020) showed that there was a high proportion of female protesters in the FFF demonstration held in 19 cities around the world on 20-27 September, 2019. In case of Korea, Eunhye Cho from the Guardians of Climate, where 99% of the activists are women, pointed out growing feminism as the main factor behind women’s involvement:

“Feminism has grown as from minor to major discourse among younger generation in Korea since 2015. Interest in gender inequality can easily expand to other issues including the environment. When they have already experienced inequality, they have more ability to empathize and lead action against injustice.” (E. Cho, personal communication, 22/02/2022)

Online communication for mobilization

Some scholars assert that the participatory politics of young people have been cultivated by their experience in the interactive and participatory culture of social media (Belotti et al., 2022; Jenkins et al., 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2019). Particularly, Kang (2016) argues that the Korean society has entered the social media age earlier than the rest of the world because of its advanced IT technology, and as a consequence, encountered the social impact of online connectivity earlier than other countries. “Internet-born, youth-driven mass protest” has become an effective repertoire for activism in Korea (Kang, 2016: 4). The Generation MZ is familiar with getting news and information and with creating communities with like-minded people on the Internet. Since the early 2000s, several candlelight protests have been mobilized against governmental policy or political decisions, all starting within online communities. Kang (2016) asserts that online communities, where Internet users circulate and

recirculate the news that captivate them, have power to trigger massive mobilization within the Korean society.

Korean youth climate organizations are also making an active use of social media. The organizations investigated in this chapter are active on more than one social media platform. Among others, interviewees referred to Instagram as the most effective platform for publicizing their activities because it focuses on visual messages. However, management of social media accounts is time-consuming, especially for volunteer-based organizations. Interviewees therefore expressed their preferences for face-to-face activities that have higher effectiveness rates for mobilization. Many of them actually use social media mostly as supplementary tools to advertise or report on their numerous ‘offline’ activities.

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic forced these organizations to use online communication while schools and universities were closed. Hajong Kim from the University Students’ Climate Action pointed out that the long-lasting pandemic has significantly influenced young people’s participation modes. Kim added that many young people nowadays find it difficult to start their social activities in person. This is why his organization is looking for ways to utilize metaverse services for mobilization.

Political power of youth climate movement and networking as a strategy

While Korean youth climate activism has become more visible in the mass media, some activists find the high level of attention to them unhelpful because they are often portrayed as ‘victims’ of climate change or as vulnerable people who need to be protected by adults, and not as powerful actors in the policy process. Such stereotypes limit their role in climate policy as advocates for youth-related issues only.

The effectiveness of their actions is another concern. The heightened profiles of Korean youth climate activists have enabled them to meet high-level politicians or governmental officers, but most of them doubt if they have become actually more influential in climate politics. Kim et al. (2021) state that youth climate activists are aware of ‘Youth Washing’, which refers to the practices that take advantage of youth for formality or advertisement without guaranteeing their meaningful participation. Frustrating experiences within formal politics resulted in the strengthening of the connection between youth climate activism and the youth rights movement (Choi, 2022).

The Korean case of youth climate activism confirms that the social status of youth has not evolved much since the new sociologists of youth revealed their exclusion from social processes (Collin, 2015). Although young people are not incapable of participating, their participation is often conceptualized as ‘consultations’, limiting their capacities of participation (Collin, 2015).

Networking among youth climate organizations can be seen as part of their strategies to increase their influence on the policy making process. Youth climate activists consider that collaboration with other social movements is essential for the growth of the ‘climate movement.’ Particularly, many interviewees

argued that it is important to collaborate with the labor movement, given that the energy transition would lead to unemployment for coal-fired powerplant workers.

Their networking efforts do not remain within the Korean territory. Korean activists meet youth from other countries for collaboration. In turn, such international cooperation has benefited for the mobilization of domestic youth climate movements. For example, Youth 4 Climate Action and the Extinction Rebellion Korea share mobilization strategies with the global communities of climate activism. Several organizations received more attention to their national activities when news on the international FFF movement arrived in Korea.

In such a networking process, a cosmopolitan perspective is emphasized. Action is organized against ‘climate villains,’ regardless the nationality of the ‘villains’, with transnational solidarity. Youth climate organizations take actions against major corporations such as Samsung or Doosan that have plans to construct coal-fired powerplants overseas. Won-jin Kim from Extinction Rebellion Korea confirmed her organization only collaborates with those who do share a cosmopolitan perspective on environmental issues. In that sense, youth climate activism is contributing to eroding nationalism.

This finding is even more interesting when the previous protests of the Generation MZ is taken into account. In the 2000s, many protests born in online communities have claimed for national interests such as stronger action against the United States to protect Korean citizens’ rights (Kang, 2016). While it may be too early to compare the Korean youth climate activism at its early stage to these massive protests that occurred in the past, the nature of climate change being a global agenda seems to broaden the sense of citizenship among the younger generation in South Korea. In order to deepen our understanding on this topic, more studies on the expanding Korean youth climate movement would be needed.

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Annex 1. List of interviewees

Interviewee name	Organization	Date
Kim, Borim Yoon, Hyunjeong	Youth 4 Climate Action (FFF Korea)	22/02/2022
Anonymous	BigWave	14/02/2022

Kim, Sun Ryul	GEYK	18/02/2022
Lee, Jiwoo		13/02/2022
Yoon, Minji	Youth Climate Emergency Action	10/03/2022
Cho, Eunhye	Guardians of Climate	22/02/2022
Cho, Anna		
Kim, Won-jin	Extinction Rebellion Korea	20/02/2022
Gwak, Seorin		27/02/2022
Choi, Jaebong	University Students' Climate Action	19/02/2022
Kim, Hajong		21/02/2022
Lee, Mingyeong	Ecoroad	15/02/2022
Anonymous		
Ma, Eun-hee	Dobong Environmental Education Center	18/02/2022
Choi, Na-young	News Penguin (Environment-specialized online newspaper)	19/02/2022

Annex 2. Guiding questions for the interviews

0. Your profile

- What is your birth year?
- What is your main occupation?
- Since when are you involved in environmental activities?
- Since when are you a member of the organization?
- Why did you join the organization?
- What is your task in your organization?
- What is your last academic degree?
- What is your gender?

1. The profile of your organization

- Establishment year
- Membership
- Main goals and arguments of your organization
- What key message does your organization try to deliver?
- What is your organization's activity plan for this year?
- Any financial support?
- How does your organization and the members of your organization use online communication for your activities? Which platforms, for what kind of activities?
- Do you find online communication helpful for mobilization? Why (not)?

- Do you think young people are more interested in environmental issues than older generations?
- Do you feel that Korean youth is getting more interested in environmental issues or climate change? Why (not)?
- What do you think about the Korean climate change (and environmental) policies? Do you think it is improving? Why (not)? What is the main contributing and hindering factors in your opinion?
- Do you think youth influence is growing in Korean climate politics?
- Which platform and strategy are most effective for mobilization, based on your experience?
- What are the difficulties or challenges in your activities?
- What is the biggest achievement?

2. Horizontal networks

- Which organizations are your organization closely working with at the national level? (Ranking of three organizations)
- Which (youth) national organizations does your organization not work with (any organizations in conflict)?
- Do you work closely with conventional environmental NGOs? Why (not)?
- Do you think the climate/environmental movement is (or should be) in solidarity with other movements? Which ones?

3. Vertical networks

- Does your organization do any international collaboration?
 - o If yes, please describe the activities.
 - o Do you find any similarities or differences between Korean youth climate activism and those in other countries?
- Does your organization do any collaboration with local organizations?
 - o If yes, please describe the activities.
- If no to both questions, do you have any plans to do so?

ⁱ Youth Earth is a research project that investigates youth participation in global environmental politics (<https://www.crespo.be/youth-earth/>).

ⁱⁱ *mirae-sedae* was not used for keyword search because the word is ambiguous and not often used by young people.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kim et al. (2021) analyzed the modularity of Korean youth climate actors to identify communities among them. They used three types of collaboration activities as the links between the actors: i) support of publicizing activities online, ii) material supports, and iii) participation in the same project.

^{iv} They have more than 10,000 individuals and 1,000 youth organizations and NGOs as members.

^v During the period of UNFCCC COPs, a number of side events are organized by state as well as non-state participants in parallel with official sessions.