

**Environmental justice seen by youth. The case of youth representatives in the international negotiations on climate change, biodiversity and sustainable development.**

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**Abstract**

This article analyses environmental justice from the perspective of youth engaged in international environmental negotiations (aged 16–35 in accordance with United Nations (UN) definitions). It complements existing research by building on comprehensive data: 141 interviews with youth participants, 63% female, 54% from the Global South, 44% firstcomers, in three different major negotiation arenas: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conferences of the Parties (COPs, COP 27 and 28), the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> COPs of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the 2023 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Goals.

The study reveals the existence of a common framing of environmental justice across negotiation platforms, gender identities, geographical backgrounds, and levels of experience in international negotiations. We find that youth conceptualize environmental justice along distributive, recognition, and participatory dimensions. On distributive justice, intergenerational and intragenerational both concerns. On recognition, self-recognition is the greater challenge; on participatory dimensions, procedural justice, with barriers such as limited financial resources and restrictive observer status remains central to their claims.

This confirms that youth are not merely protesters but proactive agents in global environmental governance, who advocate for greater inclusion in decision-making, recognition as political actors, and solidarity with other marginalized groups.

**Keywords**

Environmental justice; Youth; International environmental negotiations; Participation; Recognition.

## 1. Introduction

From grassroots movements denouncing the disproportionate burden of the climate crisis to judicial actions challenging state inaction regarding climate change, environmental justice<sup>1</sup> has become a widely discussed public concern in recent years (André and Gosseries, 2024). However, as the number of actors and platforms engaging with environmental justice grows, the question of its meaning becomes increasingly significant: What does environmental justice entail, and how do different actors articulate this concept?

In this article, we explore this question from the perspective of the youth who attend the international environmental negotiations on climate, biodiversity and the sustainable development goals (defined by the United Nations (UN) as individuals aged 16 to 35 years old)<sup>2</sup>. Studying justice discourses from this viewpoint is particularly relevant for several reasons. First, youth currently represent more than a quarter of the world's population, mostly situated in developing and least developed countries. Second, they will be the future implementers of the environmental rules under discussion. Third, youth are the age group most affected by the consequences of the environmental triple crises (climate, biodiversity loss and pollution), that particularly affect developing and least developed countries. As a result, they are likely to adopt more radical approaches to combating climate change than older generations (Foran et al., 2017).

Transnational youth mobilizations have gained relevance in global environmental politics over the past decades. The emergence of youth activists such as Vanessa Nakate and Greta Thunberg, among others, has placed young people at the forefront of global environmental justice debates. They are not only a major segment of the globalized social movements deeply concerned by the issue under the banner of, among others, the Global justice movement and Fridays for Future (de Moor et al., 2019); they have also gained prominence in institutional forums where environmental justice is discussed, notably in the

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental justice encompasses a wide range of environmental harms, including but going beyond climate change, and emphasizes the structural inequalities, historical injustices, and power asymmetries that shape environmental outcomes. The literature generally studies justice and injustice at the same time. By studying justice, one also identifies injustices.

<sup>2</sup> The UN does not have a specific definition for youth but sets the upper age limit at 30 within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, and at 35 for international climate change negotiations. Since 16 is age limit to participation in climate COPs, we use it as the lower limit for youth, with individuals under 16 being classified as children. There is a considerable difference between youth as defined in international policy-making and youth as defined in youth studies at other levels, partly due to the stronger seniority culture at the global level (Orsini, 2025).

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conferences of the Parties (COPs) (Thew, 2018; Kang et al., 2024).

Despite the increasing participation of youth in these official forums, only a handful of studies explicitly investigate how youth participants in these spaces conceptualize and articulate environmental justice, mostly analyzing climate COPs and neglecting other international environmental processes (Lefstad and Paavola, 2024; Knappe, 2024; Thew et al., 2020). Indeed, most research has focused on how other actors—such as States, private firms and NGOs (Derman, 2014; Franta, 2021; Glaab, 2017)— have approached justice, again with the case of climate justice. Our research builds on and expands such efforts by further exploring environmental justice discourses: (i) in official forums; (ii) from a youth perspective; and (iii) beyond climate change negotiations, (iv) offering a large dataset (n = 141 interviewees with youth, mostly from the Global South), which is essential to better understand how this notion is framed in different contexts, by different actors, for a more nuanced understanding of youth conceptions of environmental justice, going beyond the perception of youth as solely protesters (e.g., Neas et al., 2022; Svensson and Wahlström, 2023). Our large dataset also enables us to test and extend the findings of previous studies on youth participation in UNFCCC COPs by examining youth conceptions of environmental justice across a range of official forums and along key variables, including gender, country of origin, and experience in international negotiations. For this purpose, we ask the following research question: how do youth participants in international environmental negotiations approach environmental justice?

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews research on justice claim-making in environmental negotiations and outlines the conceptual framework that supports our study. Section 3 presents the methods for data collection and analysis. Section 4 details our results and offers a comparison based on the negotiation type, gender, geographical origin (North-South divide), and experience of youth in international meetings. The fifth and final section discusses these results.

## **2. Literature review and conceptual framework**

Environmental justice has emerged as a critical issue in environmental politics, addressing both the ethical and political dimensions of environmental problems. Since the early 1980s, scholars have extensively examined how climate change and environmental degradation

disproportionately affected marginalized populations. This body of research has for instance demonstrated how lower-income groups, African-American communities, and women often bear a disproportionate burden of pollution and other environmental hazards in their neighborhoods and workplaces (e.g., Bullard and Wright, 1987; Gaard, 2015). These environmental injustices are not only a consequence of socioeconomic disparities but are also shaped by historical and systemic patterns of discrimination.

Beyond identifying patterns of environmental injustice, research on environmental justice has also analyzed the social movements advocating for fairer environmental policies. Studies have highlighted how grassroots mobilizations have played a crucial role in demanding that marginalized communities no longer be subjected to disproportionate environmental risks and industrial activities (e.g., McGurty, 2009; Pellow, 2007). These movements, often rooted in local struggles, have contributed to the broader environmental justice discourse by pushing for policies that recognize historical responsibilities and ensure equitable environmental governance (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014). At the global level, environmental justice research has tended to focus on climate change, analyzing equity, responsibility, and governance in the context of the climate crisis. Among others, scholars have framed climate justice as a theoretical approach to address moral obligations toward future generations, arguing that intergenerational equity should be central to climate policies (Gardiner, 2006; Gosseries, 2023).

Another line of inquiry within environmental justice research emerged following the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, and has investigated environmental justice discourses at international negotiations summits. This body of literature has examined the power asymmetries embedded in international environmental negotiations and how these imbalances shape policy outcomes (Falkner, 2019; Okereke and Coventry, 2016). Scholars in this field have analyzed the influence of dominant actors—such as states, private firms, and environmental NGOs—on negotiation processes, highlighting how their interests and strategies affect discussions on environmental justice, taking, for most of them, the example of international climate negotiations (Derman, 2014; Franta, 2021; Glaab, 2017; Lefstad and Paavola, 2024). When exploring alternative governance models aimed at making climate decision-making processes more inclusive and democratic, scholars have worked on climate (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014) but also on sustainable development international negotiations (Dryer and Tanasoca, 2021; Agyeman et al., 2003).

More recently, scholarship has emphasized the need to address environmental and climate issues through a critical approach, attentive to the intersectional nature of oppression that happens along multiple, potentially cumulative, axes—including, but not limited to, gender, race, and class—as well as to the multiple spatial and temporal scales at which environmental injustices unfold. This work also highlights the responsibility of state authorities in the reproduction of environmental inequalities and underscores the indispensable yet often devalued roles of marginalized human groups and nonhuman species, which are frequently treated as expendable (Gaard, 2015; Pellow, 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on environmental justice and climate justice in global governance, relatively little attention has been paid to the justice representations of youth-led organizations and youth representatives. First, research after the 2018 climate marches has analyzed how young activists articulate discourses on environmental justice to the climate change issue at the national level. Recent ethnographic research on youth climate activists in developed countries such as Finland, the Netherlands and the United States has shown that their perception of the status quo as unjust has served as catalyst for their mobilization in collective action (Jansma et al., 2024; Piispa and Kiilakoski, 2021; Tott, 2024).

Second, at the international level, constructivist-inspired research on youth participation in environmental international politics, mainly in UNFCCC meetings, has traced the evolution of youth<sup>3</sup> discourses on intergenerational justice, emphasizing how young activists frame their demands in global forums (Knappe, 2024) and have analyzed their ability to permeate the global climate politics' discourse with regards to moral claims such as anti-fossil fuel norms and climate justice (Nisbett and Spaiser, 2023). Furthermore, recent publications have demonstrated that emotions are not merely personal responses but strategic and political resources that youth participants in international negotiations mobilize to sustain engagement and advance justice claims within spaces that are often experienced as colonized and hostile (Fine et al., 2024; Foran et al., 2017; Grosse and Mark, 2020). Finally, some scholars have highlighted that while intergenerational justice remains a central theme in youth climate activism, youth representatives increasingly integrate intra-generational

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<sup>3</sup> The articles discussed in this section rely on definitions of youth that are broadly comparable to our own, including young adults under the age of 35 in Fine et al. (2024) and youth aged 19 to 30 in Grosse and Mark (2020), to name a few.

justice concerns into their advocacy. This broader approach allows them to form coalitions with other historically marginalized groups (Thew et al., 2020).

Our contribution builds on and expands this literature by further exploring youth discourses on environmental justice in the international negotiations on climate, biodiversity and the sustainable development goals. Specifically, we draw on the conceptualizations of justice synthesized by Thew, Middlemiss, and Paavola (2020) to analyze justice claim-making in the annual COPs of the UNFCCC; the biannual COPs of the Convention on biological diversity (CBD); and the annual meetings of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). This enables us to cover three key environmental governance processes and not just climate negotiations.

For our conceptual framework on justice, rather than focusing on the specificities of each justice claim —such as issues, principles, and mechanisms (Biermann and Kalfagianni, 2020)—we adopt a threefold transversal analytical understanding of justice following Nancy Fraser (2010) and David Schlosberg (2009). First, distributive justice examines how burdens and benefits are allocated among different groups. Second, recognition justice pertains to whether an individual or group is acknowledged as a legitimate actor in decision-making processes. Third, participatory justice concerns the ability of actors to formally access the decision-making process and engage into the discussion.

As detailed in Table 1, each of these dimensions is further divided into two subcategories. Distributive justice encompasses both spatial (intra-generational justice) and temporal (inter-generational justice) distributions of burdens and benefits. Recognition justice pertains to both an actor’s self-perceived legitimacy in participating in decision-making processes (self-recognition justice) and the external legitimacy granted by other participants (social recognition justice). Finally, participatory justice includes both procedural justice, which refers to the formal mechanisms for engagement in these processes, and cognitive justice, which concerns the ability to influence how issues are framed and discussed.

*Table 1 - Dimensions and subcategories of climate justice (Thew et al., 2020)*

| DIMENSION    | SUBCATEGORY                | DESCRIPTION                                   |
|--------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Distribution | Intra-generational justice | Spatial distribution of burdens and benefits  |
|              | Inter-generational justice | Temporal distribution of burdens and benefits |

|               |                            |                                                                                 |
|---------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Recognition   | Self-recognition justice   | Actor's self-perceived legitimacy in participating in decision-making processes |
|               | Social recognition justice | External legitimacy granted by other participants                               |
| Participation | Procedural justice         | Formal mechanisms for engagement in decision-making processes                   |
|               | Cognitive justice          | Ability to influence how issues are framed and discussed                        |

While this framework has been developed for climate change negotiations, we consider it as being the most complete and the closest to our research endeavor. Indeed, first, the framework has been developed to analyze justice discourses in international climate negotiations, using COP meetings as investigation sites. Second, it has been applied to youth. However, our research adopts this framework with the aim to apply it beyond the context of climate change negotiations, and therefore to assess the need to adjust it. As a result, we also include in our discussion a reflection on the potential needed adjustments of the framework, to deal with broader non-climate case studies.

We aim at making a second contribution to the literature by discussing the evolution of the different environmental justice subcategories according to the socio-demographic characteristics of youth. Indeed, as the study of youth in global environmental politics is still a recent phenomenon, research has so far centered on punctual, limited, case studies (often only one COP), considering youth as a unique/unitary actor on the global scene. While our definition of youth is intentionally large—encompassing different life stages ranging from late adolescence (ages 16–18) to late young adulthood (ages 29–35)—this approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity within this category.

Now that existing research has provided different snapshots of youth perspectives on environmental justice, it is time to push the research agenda further by scrutinizing whether a diversity of youth identities produces a diversity of environmental justice claims. Global North and Global South countries have supported different conceptions of justice: justice discourses from the Global South tend to foreground the historical responsibility of developed countries, along with claims for compensatory justice and ecological debt, whereas Global North justice discourses have more often emphasized mitigation strategies and policy responses prioritizing efficiency over reparative measures (Roberts and Parks, 2007; Martínez-Alier et al., 2016). We therefore analyze environmental justice claims of youth from the Global

North compared to youth from the Global South. Moreover, research on youth has shown that gender identity matters (Gaard, 2015; Knappe 2024; Walters 2024) and we therefore include gender as a characteristic to look at for our study. Finally, just as Thew et al. (2020) have tried to discuss the evolution of the framework according to multiple participations to COPs, we differentiate in our study first comers to international meetings from others.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Case studies**

This article draws on qualitative data collected as part of a broader project on youth as political actors in three different international environmental negotiation processes: climate change, biodiversity and the sustainable development goals<sup>4</sup>. These negotiations were selected to expand the scope of youth participation beyond climate change meetings—the most prominent and widely publicized type of international environmental negotiation—to other critical but less visible environmental issues, such as biodiversity conservation and unsustainable development. Indeed, biodiversity loss is another crucial global crisis and the Sustainable Development Goals are currently the most encompassing framework to deal with sustainability at the global level. While climate change is of crucial importance, justice claims could vary from one negotiation process to the other, and analyzing them together could help identify new perspectives for the climate negotiations, among others.

More precisely, we analyze and compare discourses on environmental justice of youth representatives in three international negotiations. For climate change negotiations, we analyze the justice claims of youth who attended the UNFCCC COP27 and COP28 which took place in 2022 (Sharm El Sheik, Egypt) and 2023 (Dubai, United Arab Emirates) respectively. For biodiversity conservation, we analyze the justice claims of youth who attended COP15 and COP16 which took place in 2022 (Montréal, Canada) and 2024 (Cali, Colombia), respectively. And for Sustainable Development Goals, we analyze the justice claims of youth who participated in the HLPF 2023 (New York, United States). We covered several negotiation meetings and followed these meetings over a similar time period, to ensure consistency in data collection.

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<sup>4</sup> FNRS Youth Earth research project (2021-2024): <https://www.crespo.be/youth-earth/>

### **3.2. Data collection and analysis**

As several recent research endeavors on youth in global environmental politics, our research protocol follows a youth-centered methodology (Bullon-Cassis 2024; Kang et al. 2024), whereby we ask first and foremost youth about their experiences. As youth are often silenced in political science, this enables them to clearly express their views.

More precisely, the article draws on semi-structured interviews conducted<sup>5</sup> in English (124), Korean (6), French (5) and Spanish (6) with 141 youth representatives: 81 at the UNFCCC meetings; 46 at the CBD negotiations, and 14 at the 2023 HLPF, totaling nearly 60 hours of recorded exchanges, with an average duration of 29 minutes per interview. Such representatives are mostly registered under the youth or the NGO major groups, meaning they have observer status during the negotiations; only 31 of them were national youth delegates (Party badge). This is consistent with the overall distribution of youth political roles in international environmental negotiations (Buhre and Josefsson, 2024).

In most cases, youth participants were recruited directly during the event, often following youth-related sessions or by identifying individuals with youth badges. These interviews covered topics related to the identities of youth representatives (e.g., age, country of origin, educational background, number of international meetings attended), motivations, claims and impacts of their engagement. While the interviews did not explicitly include questions about climate justice, participants expressed their opinions on the main problems and priorities related to the environmental crisis at hand as well as their views on youth participation in global environmental politics. It is the very fact that many of their answers covered justice dimensions that led us to produce this comprehensive research paper on youth environmental justice claims.

The sample consists of 89 women, 51 men and one non-binary person, with an average age of 24.8 years. Among the 139 participants who provided information about their country of origin, we identified the following regional distribution: Africa (25 individuals), Asia (32), Europe (48), Latin America and the Caribbean (19), North America (13), and Oceania (2). Using the International Monetary Fund's 2022 World Economic Outlook country classification and the UN Committee for Development Policy's list of Least Developed Countries, we categorized participants based on their country's development status. According to this classification, 46%

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<sup>5</sup> The authors would like to thank Yi hyun Kang for conducting part of these interviews.

of individuals in our sample (65 individuals) are from Global North countries, while 54% (74 individuals) are from Global South countries—58 from developing countries and 16 from least developed countries. Additionally, 44% of the youth representatives interviewed were attending a COP or HLPF for the first time.

This sample is not intended to be representative of all youth participants in international environmental negotiations<sup>6</sup>. Several factors make it difficult to form a fully representative sample. Conducting interviews during international meetings is challenging, as interviewees are often firstly preoccupied with negotiations. Moreover, participant lists are published after the meetings rather than beforehand, making it impossible to select a representative sample in advance. Despite these limitations, our qualitative data provide valuable insights and open new avenues for analyzing youth discourses on environmental justice, especially from Global South youth, as our sample includes significantly more individuals from this region than previous studies on youth climate claims (Thew et al. 2020; at the exception of Ortiz et al. 2024).

The interviews were conducted by a team of three researchers, one of whom falls within the study's definition of youth. Two of them identify as women, and one as a man. Although all team members were working and living in a developed European country at the time of the study, two are originally from East Asia (developed country) and Latin America (developing country), which helped facilitate engagement with youth from regions beyond Western Europe and North America.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the Nvivo software. We coded them according to the subcategories of justice outlined in Table 1, identifying references to both justice claims (e.g., “we are included in the negotiations as representatives of future generations”) and, more frequently, to injustice claims (e.g., “negotiations do not take into consideration the needs of future generations”). We analyzed both the explicit and implicit references to justice subcategories, recording the relevant passages accordingly. By explicit references, we mean extracts of interviews where keywords such as “(in)justice” (found in 41 interviews), “equity” (in 17 interviews) and “(un)fair” (in 14 interviews) could be explicitly found to detail the specific elements that were just/fair/corresponding to equity. By implicit

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<sup>6</sup> The Youth Earth research data reveals that thousands of youth representatives have attended COP27 and COP28 while about one thousand have attended CBD COPs. Figures are much lower for HLPF meetings that gather about 50 youth.

references, we mean extracts of interviews where such keywords were not used, but the overall situation was corresponding to a subcategory of Table 1 (see examples of claims above). A single passage could be coded under multiple subcategories if it addressed more than one subcategory, but most were assigned to only one subcategory. In total, 300 passages were coded across the three negotiation processes: 165 passages for UNFCCC COPs, 103 for CBD COPs, and 32 for the 2023 HLPF. Only 20 interviews (14% of the total sample) contained no explicit or implicit reference to justice subcategories. Our large dataset enables us to provide statistics about the presence of different justice claims. We also provide detailed interview quotations to illustrate and qualify these statistical results.

While coding distributive justice was relatively straightforward, other subcategories presented more challenges. For recognition justice, responses in which youth justified their presence in international forums as legitimate stakeholders—such as “Youth should have a voice and should be participating in today’s policies because that will affect them” (interview 130)—were categorized under self-recognition justice. In contrast, responses addressing how youth are perceived by other stakeholders and the broader public—such as “I think everyone has a stigma around youth” (interview 4)—were classified under social recognition justice.

For participatory justice, passages coded under procedural justice concerned the formal mechanisms and barriers that enable or restrict youth participation in decision-making. In this context, references to “youth-washing” were included in this subcategory, as they highlight the contradiction between the growing recognition of youth (as victims of environmental crises and legitimate actors in global environmental governance) and the persistent barriers preventing them from “having a seat at the negotiation table” (Interview 23). Finally, passages coded under cognitive justice addressed the extent to which youth can—or cannot—shape the framing of discussions and influence the terms of the debates.

In terms of thematic distribution, most of the passages coded for distributive justice emerged from responses about youth perceptions of their relationships with other stakeholders in international environmental negotiations. In contrast, passages concerning recognition and participatory justice primarily stemmed from responses about the challenges and solutions related to environmental crises and youth participation in environmental governance.

To discuss the distribution of environmental claims according to different youth identities, we coded the geographical origin, gender and number of attendance(s) to international meetings of our interviewees (see above).

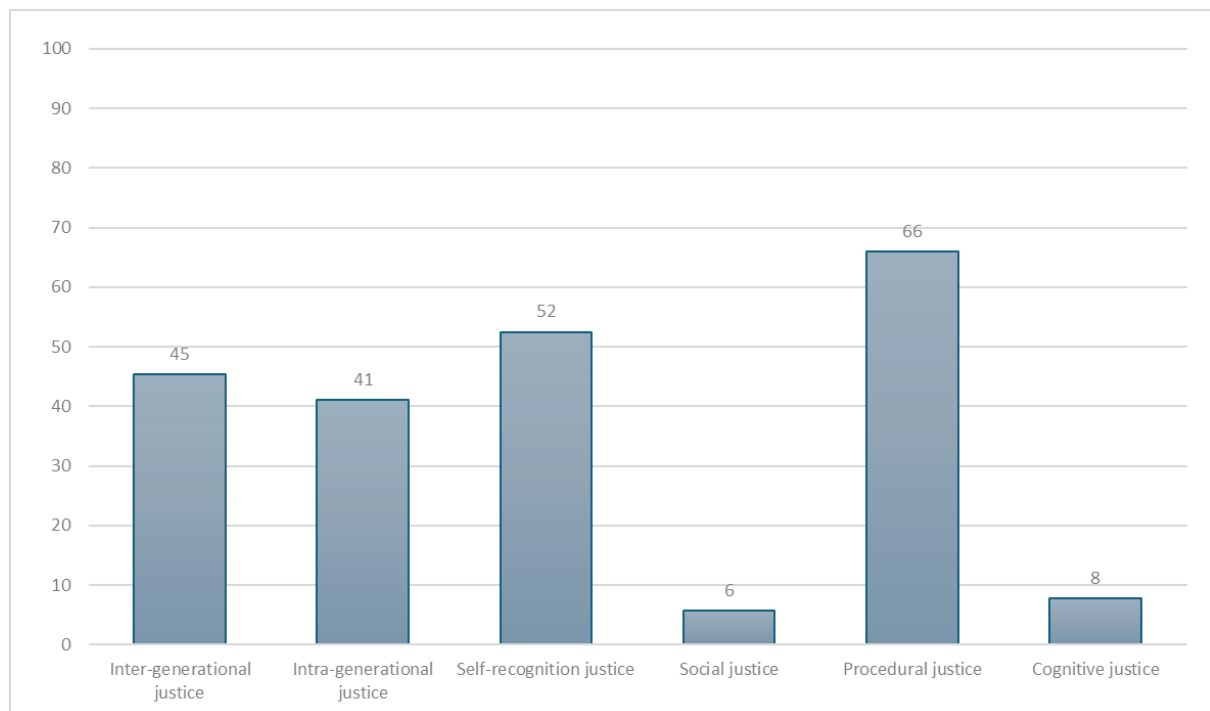
## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Youth discourses on environmental justice: combining justice dimensions**

Our analysis of justice claim-making among individuals in our sample shows that youth representatives in international environmental negotiations incorporate elements from all the three dimensions of justice in their discourses. As illustrated in Graph 1, distributive, recognition, and participation justice are all present in different proportions in the justice discourses coded from our interviews.

Within distributive justice, both intergenerational (45% of youth representatives in our sample referenced intergenerational justice at least once in their interview) and intragenerational (41%) justice recur at relatively similar rates in our interviews. This finding aligns with existing literature on youth justice discourses in environmental politics, which suggests that youth activists not only make first-order justice claims for themselves and for future generations that some of them claim to represent, but are also inclined to include justice considerations for other collective actors affected by environmental crises, such as indigenous populations and women (Knappe, 2024; Thew et al., 2020).

*Graph 1 – Percentage of justice subcategories occurrence in youth representatives' discourses (N=141 interviews)*



Most of our interviewees acknowledge that the youth category overlaps with other marginalized groups. This intersectionality creates opportunities for alliances with communities that have historically played a limited role in environmental politics. A Danish female youth representative interviewed at CBD COP15 highlighted this point, stating:

“I think there are a lot of synergies, if we do it in a meaningful way and I think it's also important to acknowledge again the diversity of young people. There are all sorts of young people with different genders, there are young people who are indigenous and therefore I also think that it is important when we talk about the inclusion of young people that shouldn't just be youth. But that it's also young woman or young in all of their diversity” (interview 86).

Graph 1 also reveals that some subcategories of justice appear more frequently than others, with recognition and participation justice showing greater variation in their prevalence. Within the recognition dimension, self-recognition justice is notably dominant—52% of youth representatives in our sample referenced it at least once in their interview, compared to just 6% for social justice. This nearly sixfold difference suggests that youth

representatives tend to prioritize asserting their own legitimacy in environmental politics rather than emphasizing external recognition. This emphasis on self-recognition does not necessarily translate into active participation in environmental decision-making. Instead, it reflects youths' determination to be seen as influential actors in international environmental conferences, capable of driving meaningful change.

Youth representatives affirm their agency as legitimate actors in environmental politics through various strategies. They present themselves as those most affected by "social and climate injustices" (interview 52) stemming from the "decisions of older generations" (interview 46). They also describe themselves as actors who "are becoming more confident, becoming bolder, speaking our minds, and saying our truth" (Interview 4). Additionally, they construct narratives that intertwine multiple subcategories of justice, frequently linking self-recognition with inter-generational justice to portray themselves as more aware and capable of driving changes than older generations. For instance, they emphasize their heightened sense of urgency, noting that "the level of urgency for us is very different from that of the generation before us" (interview 23). Youth also perceive themselves as less constrained by the rigidity of international organizations, which allows them to adopt a "more radical" approach to the climate crisis (interview 41).

Within the participation dimension, procedural justice is significantly more prevalent than cognitive justice, with 66% of youth representatives in our sample who referenced it at least once in their interview, compared to just 8% for cognitive justice. This disparity suggests that, while cognitive injustices—such as limitations on their ability to shape discussions—are acknowledged, youth representatives primarily view formal participation barriers as the greatest source of participatory injustice. Many interviewees expressed frustration over their exclusion from substantive discussions, despite the growing social acceptance of youth involvement in environmental politics and their self-perceived legitimacy as key actors in negotiations. As explained by a female youth representative from Austria "I don't think that it has fully arrived in all policymakers' heads that youth participation is not only having youth, but also [about] including youth and working with youth" (interview 117).

These barriers take various forms, including limited funding for youth to attend negotiations in person and the logistical challenges of obtaining travel permits such as visas. However, concerns about participation barriers also extend to the power dynamics within the very spaces where environmental negotiations take place. Since most youth representatives

in our sample hold “observer” status at these events—only 31 of them have a Party badge granting them greater access to the negotiations—, they are not permitted to actively participate in negotiations or have their voices heard, as several interviews revealed. For instance, a Ugandan female youth representative interviewed at CBD COP16 observed, “young people are coming up a lot, you know, and are getting interested in participating in high-level negotiations, but I also think that they have not yet been involved much” (interview 123). Similarly, a male youth representative from Niger, interviewed at UNFCCC COP28, criticized this exclusion, stating “we don’t want to be outside the room, we want to sit around the table and discuss” (interview 67).

#### **4.2. Youth discourses on environmental justice according to environmental topic and to youth identities: a similar discourse despite heterogenous contexts and profiles**

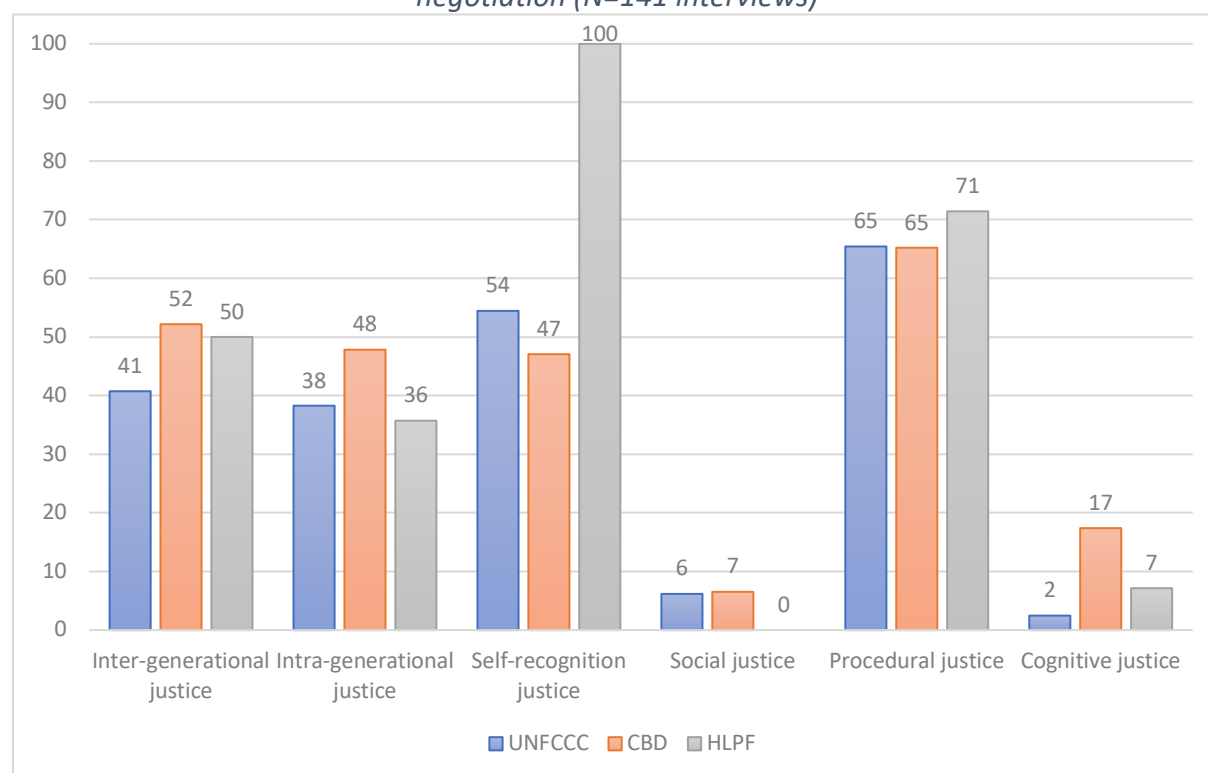
To assess whether the recurrence of justice subcategories remains stable or varies based on the context and the profiles of our interviewees, we conducted several comparisons using four variables. First, we examined the type of negotiation (UNFCCC, CBD, and HLPF) to extend research on youth discourses on environmental justice beyond climate change discussions. Second, we considered gender (women, men and non-binary) to assess whether justice claim-making differs based on gender identity. Third, we analyzed the country of origin of the youth interviewees (Global North vs. Global South) to address the existing gap in youth justice discourses in environmental politics, which have predominantly focused on Global North youth. Finally, we looked at the experience in international environmental conferences (first-time participants vs. those with multiple participations) of the youth interviewees in our sample. On this dimension, we particularly explored whether intra-generational considerations become more significant as youth actors gain experience in environmental negotiations, as observed by Thew et al. (2020) for climate negotiations.

Graph 2 shows that justice claim-making remains relatively consistent across the three international environmental negotiations considered in this study. First, within the distributive dimension, recurrence rates for intergenerational and intragenerational justice remain at similar levels across the three negotiations. These rates range from 36% of youth representatives interviewed at the 2023 HLPF referencing intragenerational justice to 52% of youth interviewed at CBD COPs mentioning intergenerational justice.

To the contrary within recognition justice, a significant gap emerges: self-recognition justice appears with medium (UNFCCC and CBD COPs) to high (2023 HLPF) recurrence, whereas social justice is referenced at very low levels across all three negotiations. The fact that all youth participants in the 2023 HLPF mentioned self-recognition justice at least once can be interpreted as an effort to assert their legitimacy in this highly exclusive political forum, which serves as the central United Nations platform for reviewing and following up on the 2030 Agenda.

A similar pattern is observed for participation justice. Recurrence levels for procedural justice are consistently high, ranging from 65% of youth representatives interviewed at UNFCCC and CBD COPs mentioning this subcategory at least once to 71% for the persons interviewed at the 2023 HLPF. In contrast, cognitive justice's scores remain low across all three negotiations.

*Graph 2 - Percentage of justice subcategories' occurrence by type of international negotiation (N=141 interviews)*

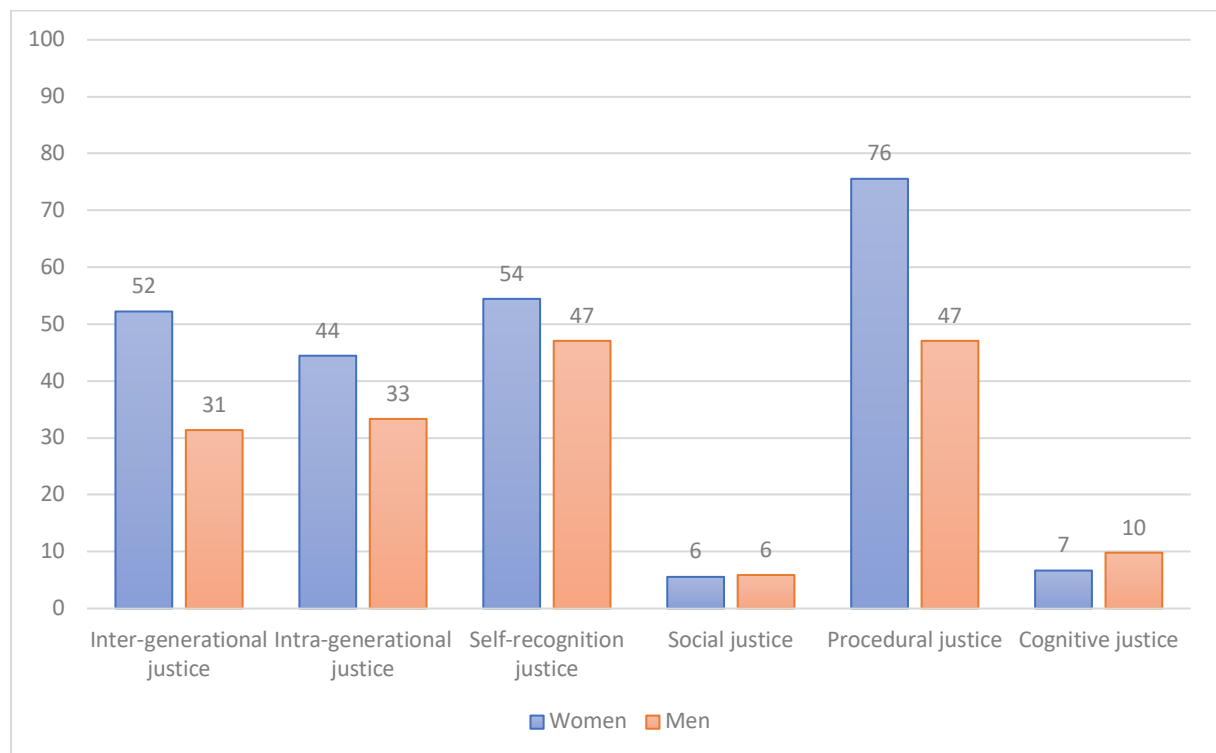


The comparison across the three types of negotiations confirms that the pattern observed for the entire sample remains rather consistent. Recurrence levels for social and cognitive justice remain significantly lower in all three contexts, suggesting that this trend is not specific to climate change (81 individuals), biodiversity (46), or sustainable development (14). Because fluctuations are stronger in smaller samples than in larger ones, values for the

HLPF may appear more volatile compared to those for other types of forums, which may help explain the higher observed level of self-recognition justice.

On gender, Graph 3 indicates that justice claim-making patterns remain relatively consistent across gender types, though variations are more pronounced than in the comparison based on negotiation type. To enhance the readability of the graph, we excluded the recurrence levels for the non-binary individual, as this person mentioned all subcategories in the corresponding interview, except social and cognitive justice. Social and cognitive justice scores are either very low or nonexistent for women, men, and the non-binary individual in our sample. The recurrence levels of other justice subcategories are relatively similar, with the greatest variation once again observed in procedural justice.

*Graph 3 – Percentage of justice subcategories occurrence by gender (N=140 interviews)*

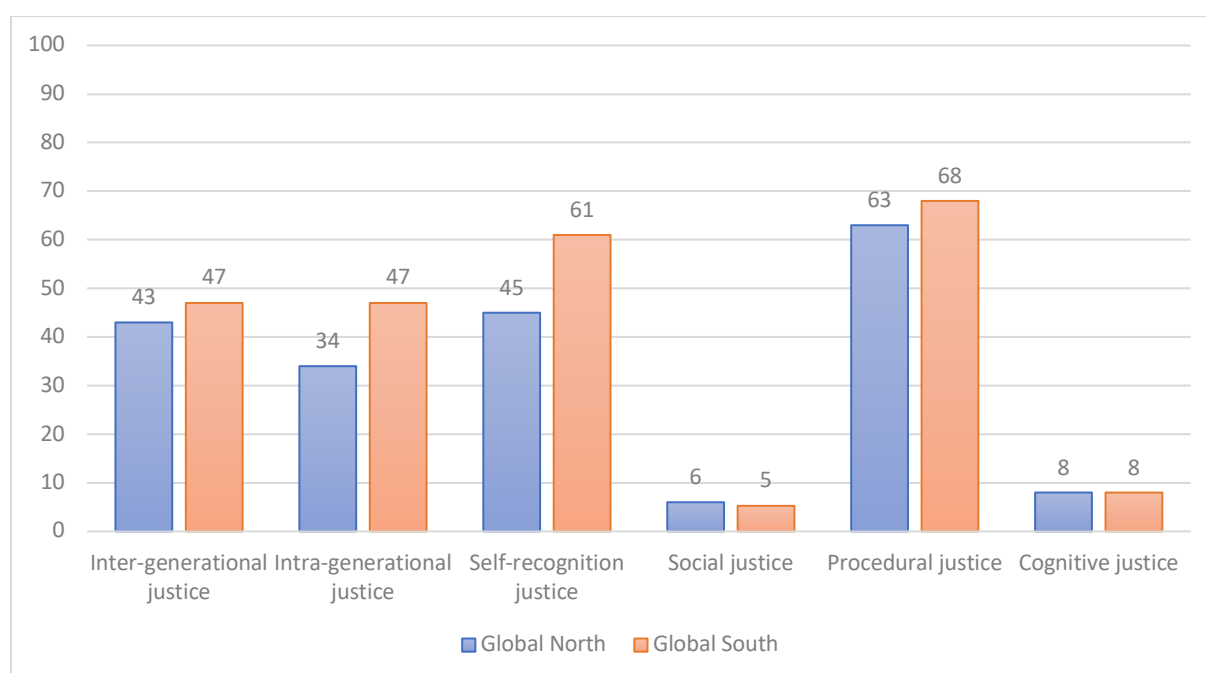


While patterns are similar, women score notably higher in almost all justice subcategories. This can be explained by two factors: first, women make up 63% of our sample; and second, extensive research indicates that women are more vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis than men (Arora-Jonsson, 2016; Dankelman, 2010; Pearse, 2017), and are,

as a result, more likely to emphasize climate injustices than men, a trend that seems confirmed for other issue areas.

On geographical origin, Graph 4 suggests that the recurrence of justice subcategories in youth discourses is relatively similar for individuals from the Global North compared to individuals from the Global South for the 139 individuals for whom we were able to code the country-of-origin information.

*Graph 4 - Justice subcategories on the basis of the Global North-South divide (N=139 interviews)*

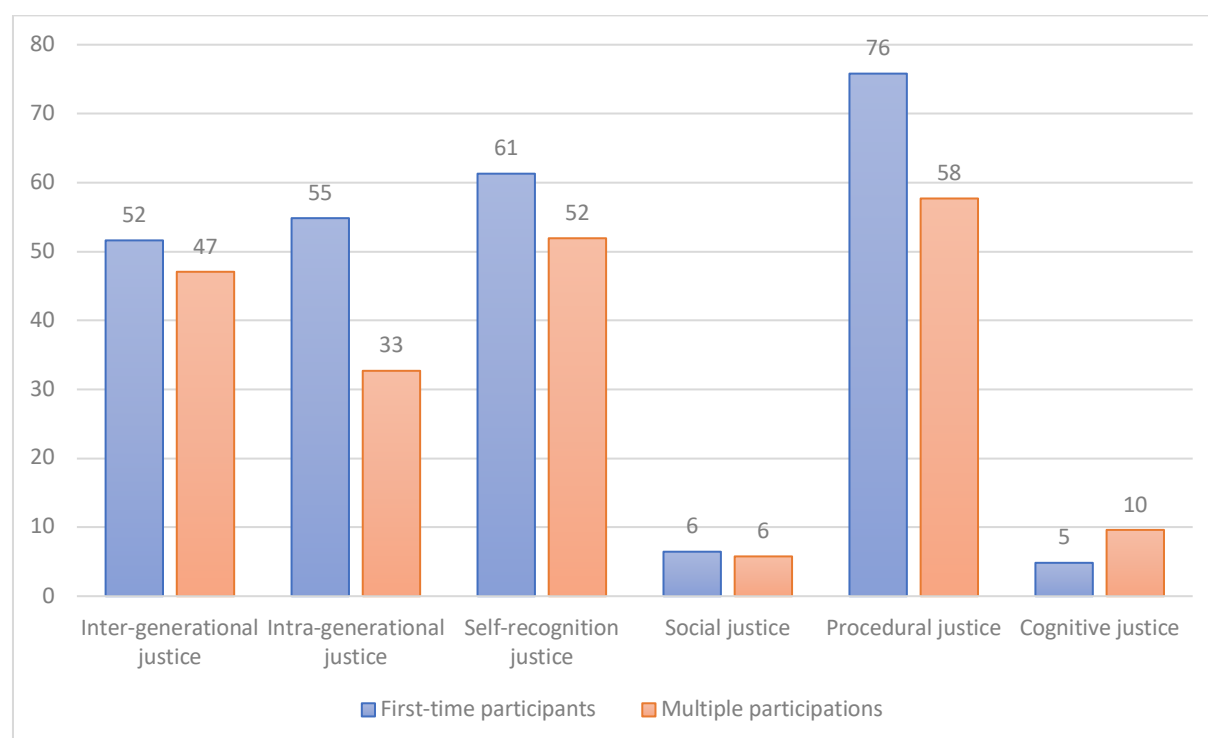


However, higher recurrence levels of justice subcategories were recorded among individuals from the Global South, including 58 youth from developing countries and 16 from least developed countries. This result aligns with the extensive literature on the differentiated effects of environmental crises across regions and the asymmetries in participation in international environmental governance between individuals from the Global North and Global South (Hanegraaff, 2015; Muñoz et al., 2009; Redclift and Sage, 1998). For youth and other actors from the Global South who are more threatened by climate change and face greater barriers to participating in environmental politics, the higher recurrence of nearly all justice categories—particularly self-recognition justice (19 percentage points)—appears to be a logical outcome.

Although discussions about the disproportionate impact of environmental crises on the Global South and the unequal participation in decision-making processes are generally raised by youth from developing and least developed countries (Gonzalez, 2015), their counterparts from the Global North also appear to recognize this disparity and express solidarity with youth from the Global South. For instance, a young female representative from the Netherlands, interviewed at UNFCCC COP27, stated that she “feels ashamed and responsible for the lacking policies of the Global North that are killing millions of people in the Global South” (interview 54).

Finally, regarding the experience of youth, Graph 5 shows that among the 113 participants who provided information during their interviews about their participation in international environmental negotiations, the recurrence levels of justice subcategories are relatively similar, except for intra-generational justice (which differs by 22 percentage points) and procedural justice (with an 18 percentage-point gap).

*Graph 5 - Justice subcategories on the basis of youth experience in international negotiations (N=113 interviews)*



The high level of recurrence for first-time participants in intra-generational justice does not align with the results of the study conducted by Thew et al. (2020), who examined the

evolution of justice claim-making among youth activists for members of a British youth NGO participating in UNFCCC negotiations. Their study found that, over time, youth representatives tended to make fewer first-order intergenerational claims and instead switched to solidarity claims about injustices experienced by other groups in the present. However, two key differences in research design may explain this discrepancy. Unlike the aforementioned study, our research does not follow a longitudinal approach to youth justice discourses, meaning it does not track how justice claim-making evolves from one conference to another for the same individual. Additionally, our sample is primarily composed of youth from the Global South, who, as previously shown, tend to score higher across almost all justice subcategories. In our study, it appears at first glance that youth participating to several international meetings seem to have less radical claims regarding environmental justice compared to others. Indeed, most of them explained that their first COP was overwhelming, probably emphasizing their perceptions of the lack of justice of the process. However, expressing fewer injustice claims should not necessarily be interpreted as reflecting less critical attitudes toward international environmental negotiations by multiple participants. Rather, this pattern may suggest that more experienced participants gradually adopt a more “reformist” orientation (Foran et al., 2017) as they learn to navigate official forums more effectively. This dynamic may help explain why individuals with multiple participations score lower on procedural justice.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

Our study provides a comprehensive analysis of justice claim-making among youth representatives in international environmental negotiations. The findings reveal that youth discourses on environmental justice extend beyond intergenerational justice to incorporate elements from all three dimensions of justice—distributive, recognition, and participation. While intergenerational justice remains a significant component of youth claims, the frequent recurrence of intragenerational, self-recognition, and procedural justice highlights the intersectional nature of youth justice discourses and their demand for meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

A key finding is that youth activists do not solely frame justice claims in terms of their rights as future generations. Instead, they actively recognize their agency and advocate for the greater inclusion of marginalized groups who are disproportionately affected by environmental crises, such as indigenous communities and women. This aligns with prior

research suggesting that youth justice claims have evolved beyond self-representation toward solidarity with other vulnerable actors (Grosse and Mark, 2020; Knappe, 2024; Thew et al., 2020). The intersectional awareness expressed by youth representatives demonstrates their ability to form strategic alliances with historically excluded groups, reinforcing their role as key actors in global environmental governance.

Our findings also indicate that recognition and participation justice play a crucial role in youth claim-making. Youth representatives prioritize self-recognition over external social recognition, asserting their legitimacy as political actors despite persistent barriers to substantive participation. This reflects the paradoxical nature of youth inclusion in international negotiations: while their presence is increasingly accepted, their ability to shape outcomes remains limited. As previous studies have pointed out (Grosse and Mark, 2020; Fine et al., 2023; Kwon, 2019), youth often struggle to gain access to decision-making spaces and meaningful engagement remains elusive. The prevalence of procedural justice claims further underscores the frustration that youth experience due to exclusionary practices, such as complex negotiation processes, limited financial resources, and restrictive observer status.

Our comparative analysis further highlights that justice claim-making remains relatively stable across different negotiation platforms (UNFCCC, CBD, and HLPF), gender identities, geographical backgrounds (Global North vs. Global South), and levels of experience in international negotiations. While some variations exist, particularly in procedural justice and self-recognition justice for women and for youth from the Global South, the overall consistency of youth discourses suggests a shared understanding of environmental justice across diverse contexts. The higher recurrence of justice claims among women youth and among youth from the Global South is particularly noteworthy, as it aligns with broader discussions on climate injustice and the structural inequalities embedded in global environmental governance (Knappe 2024; Flavell 2023; Hadden and Bush, 2021; Vadrot, 2020).

Interestingly, while youth from the Global South are more likely to emphasize justice claims due to their heightened exposure to environmental risks, environmental vulnerability and systemic barriers, our findings suggest a growing awareness and solidarity from their Global North counterparts. Some youth from the Global North explicitly acknowledge the historical responsibility of their countries in exacerbating environmental injustices, reinforcing

the idea that justice discourses are not solely shaped by direct vulnerability but also by a broader ethical commitment to equity and accountability.

While we find back all the dimensions of justice highlighted by Thew et al. 2020, our study identifies several specificities of the studied youth in our three processes. Among others, such youth refer to few social justice and cognitive justice claims. Moreover, their claims seem to be less numerous when they have experience of international meetings. Finally, as we coded justice claims partly inductively, we also identified claim dimensions that are not directly quoted in the study by Thew et al. (2020). Indeed, several youth discourses on environmental justice include considerations of Nature's rights. Although in total only 11 interviewees—mostly youth from the Global South (7 individuals)—mentioned this topic, it is gaining prominence in youth justice claim-making. These interviewees adopt a symbiotic perspective on human and Nature's rights, as expressed by a young female representative from Kenya interviewed at CBD COP15: "It's sometimes absurd to fight for the rights of people if we can't really fight for the rights of nature" (interview 100). As youth participants in international environmental negotiations are increasingly driven to advocate for collective justice, future conceptualizations of environmental justice may incorporate broader, more transversal understandings of the entities to benefit from such justice, including youth, other affected collective actors, and Nature. This emphasis aligns with critical perspectives in environmental studies that advocate greater attention to non-human species and more-than human justice (Gaard, 2015; Pellow, 2025).

Our research also contributes to the growing body of literature on youth participation in global environmental politics by highlighting that youth are not merely passive victims of environmental injustice but active agents who articulate multidimensional justice claims. Their strong emphasis on procedural and recognition justice underscores that meaningful participation remains a significant challenge in international environmental negotiations. This finding calls for institutional reforms to ensure that youth are not only present in decision-making spaces but also have a substantive influence on policy outcomes.

Our results align with previous studies on youth involvement in environmental politics, confirming that environmental justice is a fundamental element of the discourse among both youth protesters and participants in international forums (Jansma et al., 2024; Neas et al., 2022; Piispa and Kiilakoski, 2021; Svensson and Wahlström, 2023). In particular, our systematic quantitative analysis of a large-n sample consolidates and extends the findings

of previous studies that relied solely on qualitative research designs. Youth are not merely protesters focused on intergenerational justice; rather, they are political actors capable of articulating complex environmental justice narratives. They denounce current injustices and advocate for greater participation in decision-making spaces to address these issues.

Although they may not receive as much media attention as youth demonstrators, youth representatives in international environmental negotiations articulate diverse and intersectional justice claims that extend beyond intergenerational justice. Their discourses emphasize the need for inclusive, equitable, and transformative environmental governance, underscoring the urgency of addressing the structural inequalities that continue to marginalize young people and other vulnerable communities in global environmental politics.

Our study faces limitations inherent to the complexities of collecting large datasets across multiple international conferences. These challenges may affect the generalizability of our findings, particularly regarding whether they accurately represent all youth engagement forms in international environmental politics. Additionally, methodological choices regarding the interpretation of justice subcategories—particularly responses that could potentially fall under social and cognitive justice—may limit the replicability of our findings.

Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to examine how youth justice claim-making evolves over time, particularly in response to shifts in political contexts and negotiation outcomes. Additionally, further studies could explore how youth justice claims are received by policymakers and whether they translate into tangible policy changes. Expanding the scope of analysis to include youth participation in national and regional environmental governance could also provide a more nuanced understanding of their role in shaping environmental justice discourses.

## **6. Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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