

# **JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK**

vol. XXXX 1/2-2024

## **ENACTING THE FUTURE: ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM WORLDWIDE**

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Published by:  
Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik  
an den österreichischen Universitäten

**Journal für Entwicklungspolitik (JEP)**  
**Austrian Journal of Development Studies**

**Publisher:** Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik an den österreichischen Universitäten

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*Research project*

ANTJE DANIEL, PETRA DANNECKER

**Is Fridays for Future a Phenomenon of the Global North?  
Youth Activism of Fridays for Future: An Intersectional and  
Global Perspective**

**1. Introduction**

Since Greta Thunberg's strike in front of the Swedish parliament in 2018, environmental activism is back in the academic and political spotlight. Fridays For Future (FFF) grew to become the biggest global movement since Occupy and has been since then the most important civil society actor capable of mobilising masses for climate justice. In 2019, young people in more than 164 countries all over the world started to organise protests. Speaking of a 'global climate crisis', FFF calls for socially responsible and ecologically equitable environmental policy, and for climate justice. Due to the engagement of FFF, environmental and climate justice has become a central social conflict arena, one that shapes political and public debates (Daniel et al. 2020; Daniel/Deutschmann 2020); although neither the engagement of young people nor environmental activism is new. As early as at the United Nations World Climate Conference in 1992, a 12-year-old girl spoke at the UN claiming for ecological change (Dietz/Garrelts 2013). Important successes were achieved, including global environmental regimes such as the Kyoto-Protocol of 1997, and in 2015 the Paris Agreement. Yet, over time, these incremental approaches have been challenged for ignoring issues of climate justice, for failing to transform dominant economic paradigms, and for their naivety in the face of repeatedly failing climate summits (de Moor 2018). It is against this backdrop that new climate justice movements such as the FFF have emerged (Daniel

et al. 2020), accompanied by a growing academic interest in, and studies of, youth environmental activism. However, the analysis of the relevant academic literature on youth environmental activism reveals several blind spots which will be shortly discussed in the following. These blind spots, especially in youth and social movement studies, will be discussed in the first section of this essay, as they are the starting point for the research project which will be presented in the second section.

## **2. Youth environmental activism: a critical reflection on the main assumptions and discussions in youth and social movement studies**

First, despite the growing academic interest in youth activism, the motives of youth and their particular understandings of ‘political’ activism generally remain insufficiently investigated. This can be traced back to the dominant conceptualisation of ‘youth’, especially in youth studies, as a ‘lost generation’, as seen once again regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Maguire 2020), or as a ‘vulnerable’ group, as in the context of the Global South (Cooper et al. 2019; Mugeere et al. 2021). In addition, youth studies have been argued, that the political engagement and political interest of youth, especially in Europe, is low (Delli Carpini 2000). Since then, youth has no longer been perceived or conceptualised as a politically active force (Zinnecker 2003). Even in social movement studies, youth engagement was less studied and discussed and a vigorous scientific as well as political debate about the ‘decrease’ of youth political engagement has dominated since then (Furlong 2013). Scholars arguing that youth engagement was not declining but changing, also due to a different understanding of what is ‘political’ or what political engagement implies, hardly entered the mainstream social science (Weiss 2020) or social movement studies (Earl et al. 2017). Political engagement is still understood and measured through formal political participation rather than in terms of activism.

A second shortcoming in the current studies is how youth is conceptualised. Often, youth is defined as ‘just an age group’ or a ‘stage of life’, namely the time period when people become contributing members of society (O’Higgins 2001), instead of a category which is socially and culturally constructed and thus a category that varies in its meaning.

This persists, despite critical interventions arguing that youth is neither a universal phase nor a homogenous category but must be understood through context-specific analysis (Dillabough/Kennelly 2010). However, these interventions are hardly reflected in political discourses or mainstream youth or social movement studies. Instead, international organisations such as the UN are increasingly interested in youth (defined as an age group) and promote their engagement, as several international climate conferences for youth demonstrate (Riemer/Dittmer 2016, 164). Since children and youth constitute the majority of the population in Africa and Asia (Honwana/de Boeck 2005; Riemer et. al. 2016), development agencies also construct youth as an asset in the fight against climate crisis and for development in general (UNDG 2013). Only a few studies regarding youth in the Global South have carefully analysed the relevant socio-political context and are “taking seriously what young people say about their own lives and the socio-political contexts in which they live” (Cooper et al. 2019: 35). This brief reflection already shows that the understanding of youth and their political activism might differ in the frame of the global engagement of FFF. This has not yet been sufficiently studied.

These blind spots influence and deepen a third blind spot regarding especially social movement studies. There is doubtless a wide spectrum of research on social movements, including environmental and climate movements (della Porta/Parks 2013; Dietz/Garrelts 2013) and youth activism (Pickard/Bessant 2019). However, most of these studies only refer to youth as an age group, as discussed above, rather than offering an understanding of the diversity of what youth means and what particular kind of motives youth have in their respective contexts, especially but not exclusively with regard to the Global South. An in-depth, context-specific understanding of youth, including their self-understanding and conceptions of the political, as well as an understanding of how the category ‘youth’ intersects with other categories such as race, class, and gender, is missing. This intersectional lens has not yet arrived in mainstream social movement and youth studies (Chun et al. 2013; Daniel 2021) and is just in its early stages regarding FFF. The existing studies have shown that FFF in Europe is shaped by ‘white’, middle class and well-educated activists (Neas et al. 2022: 7). Also, for FFF in Austria, it has been shown that youth intersects with gender and (the middle) class (Daniel/Deutschmann 2020; Daniel 2022), revealing the relevance of an intersectional lens for under-

standing youth activism, also concerning the Global South. Although global dynamics of protest are increasingly considered, less research on social movements in the Global South, research that addresses cultural particularities or contrasts protest waves between and within the Global North and the South in general (Fadaee 2015; Daniel/Neubert 2019) and with an intersectional lens in particular, has been conducted. This is also the case regarding FFF: while research on FFF in the Global North is increasing, youth activism in the Global South remains under-investigated (Neas et al. 2022).

### **3. Embracing the plurality and diversity of FFF from a global and intersectional lens**

In order to respond to these research gaps mentioned above, our research project “Youth environmental activism: a global and intersectional perspective” (FWF Funded 2023-2026) analyses youth activism in Austria, Bangladesh and Uganda. FFF has not yet been analysed in its global dimensions or regarding intersectionality. Most comparative approaches to the global protest wave of FFF remain predominantly limited to Europe (de Moor et al. 2020). Thus, in this project we approach the global relatedness of FFF through a North-South and a South-South comparison. Scholars have already examined the need to perceive activism as part of a globalised world (Smith/Johnston 2002); however, an in-depth, context-specific understanding of youth activism as a driver of socio-ecological transformations in its global interrelatedness is lacking. This is exacerbated by the fact that no case study (either quantitative or qualitative) has ever been conducted regarding FFF in the Global South, nor have North-South or South-South comparisons been undertaken. A comparative case study thus offers insights into how youth-led activism unfolds in different locations. FFF is at the centre of the analysis, in addition to those actors who participated in the Global Strikes after 2019 and who identify with FFF.

This research is politically relevant, since youth are acting at the forefront of environmental movements. In addition, youth have become increasingly in dialogue with politicians. Therefore, youth engagement is not ‘just’ a certain stage of life but lays the foundation for transformation



(Riemer et al. 2016), since those engaged are taking up important political and social leadership in the future (Fischer 2019: 430).

By combining youth and social movement studies with an intersectional lens, our research investigates the motives and activism of youth in Austria, Bangladesh and Uganda in order to get a context-specific understanding of youth and what is 'political' for them, including an understanding of the meaning of social categories such as youth, gender, class and race, and the extent to which they overcome or reproduce social inequalities. At the same time, our research will investigate similarities and differences between the cases and unpack the relevance of respective political, social, economic and cultural context on youth (activism).

One reason for selecting Austria, Bangladesh and Uganda, is that in all three countries youth were inspired by Greta Thunberg. FFF in Bangladesh, as well as in Uganda, belong to the most active FFF groups in the Global South. They became visible on social media and through several protests. A new wave of youth environmental activism positioning themselves under the umbrella of FFF has been formed in these localities, mostly working together with established actors (Nakabuye et al. 2020; Nkuba et al. 2021). Although all FFF related protests take place under the master frame of climate justice, FFF demands vary by country, as the examination of the rare journal articles and academic literature shows. While FFF in Austria predominantly addresses the same demands as Greta Thunberg (such as the attempt to stop global warming, a process in line with the Paris Agreement), FFF in Bangladesh and Uganda interlink their demands with their experiences of climate crisis, such as natural disasters (drought, floods, land degradation) or local problems such as deforestation or waste management (Nakabuye et al. 2020; Mugeere et al. 2021). FFF in both countries refer to overlapping crises on the one hand and the vulnerability of their respective populations, including youth, and their lack of resilience on the other. Thus, the climate crisis is not only understood as a natural disaster in the Global South, where the climate crisis is felt most strongly (IPCC 2021), but is also linked to food shortages, the spread of diseases, health problems, migration and social inequality and conflicts. Thus, youth activists in the Global South contribute to linking globalising orientations (master frames) of climate justice with context-specific problems. However, not only might their demands differ from activists in the Global North, but so also their understanding of 'politics',

their motives for activism, and perceptions of what must be changed. The investigation of these differences is one of the main research objectives of this project.

Four aspects stand out when comparing the Global North (Austria) to the Global South (Bangladesh and Uganda): First, in contrast to Austria, Uganda and Bangladesh are among the most climate vulnerable countries in the world (IPCC 2021). Second, Uganda and Bangladesh are countries, unlike Austria, where youth constitutes a major part of the population. In addition, in both countries, international donors have initiated and supported ‘organised’, youth-led climate activism since the late 1990s. This dependence on the financial support of donors and thus an orientation towards global environmental policies must be considered (Koli 2015 for Bangladesh). Third, the political context is different in the Global North and South. Accordingly, in contrast to Austrian democracy, the moderate autocracies of Uganda and Bangladesh engender a context in which freedom of expression and assembly is constitutionally granted but repeatedly restricted (BTI 2022a; b). In Bangladesh the state increasingly controls and prohibits the press and political activism. Fourth, the history of environmental activism differs: Bangladesh and Uganda do not look back on a long history of ‘organised’ and coordinated climate activism, as does Austria. Instead, a myriad of social movements has been formed to struggle against the environmental impacts of growth-centric development, regarding dam construction and coal mining, or the disappearance of forests, wetlands and open space. It can be best described, especially for Bangladesh, as an ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Martinez-Alier 2002). In contrast, Austria has a history of organised environmentalism focussing on the expansion of the energy industry, air and water pollution, pesticides, and the destruction of the natural landscape for tourism in the Alpine region. Climate and environment are currently among the topics with the highest mobilisation capacity in Austria (Dolezal 2019). The movements institutionalised themselves in the 1990s. In recent years, FFF has brought climate activism back to the streets (Daniel et al. 2020).

This comparison between the Global North and South however, should not hide the fact that the Global South, in particular, is inherently diverse, which is the key reasoning for the selection of Bangladesh and Uganda. As already noted, the political context in Bangladesh is far more restrictive than in Uganda. Furthermore, Uganda and Bangladesh differ culturally

and religiously, which in turn is essential to understanding different forms of activism and related motives.

Based on preliminary studies, we assume that middle-class representation might not be as important in Uganda and Bangladesh in comparison to Austria. In contrast, we assume female participation in Bangladesh to be lower due to the local Islamic gender order, and in Uganda as comparable to levels of engagement in Austria. FFF Uganda became prominent through the engagement of Hilda Flavia Nakabuye and Vanessa Nakate at UN conferences, in line with the female leadership of Greta Thunberg, which led to the widely shared image of female youth engagement in Uganda. Doubtless, it must be considered that gender identity and relations have culturally different meanings in Austria, Bangladesh and Uganda (for literature on gender see Dannecker 2006; 2015). Due to varying understandings of gender, we assume a more conflictual mobilisation and lower impact, especially in Bangladesh. In order to understand gender relations from a culture sensitive perspective it is necessary to investigate how women shape motives and activism. In summary, the research project wants to investigate how social categories define young people's motives by applying a mixed method approach. Beyond that, it seeks to explore whether these categories produce inequalities, hierarchies and exclusion within youth movements and across North-South divides and how they shape motivations, the understanding of the 'political', and activism.

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