



# Climate change and transformations of justice — Views of just distribution in the Finnish policy debate

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**ABSTRACT:** Justice is a central concept in the international regime of climate change mitigation and adaptation and in proposals for the transition towards a low-carbon society. However, in documents on climate policy, the notion is seldom explicated in any detail. Research on environmental change has typically advanced specific and diverse visions of justice, and does not yet provide a comprehensive theoretical framework of different alternative notions. In this article, we present such a framework that incorporates 6 central conceptions of distributive justice and which indicates the relations between them. Based on in-depth interviews with a selected group of relevant actors in the debate on climate change in Finland — high-ranking professional politicians, leaders, researchers and activists — we study the interplay of environmental change and notions of justice. We show how articulations of justice can be connected with this framework, enabling the identification of their points of agreement and contention as well as their main lines of redefinition and transformation that stimulate acceptance and rejection of climate policy.

**KEY WORDS:** Distributive justice · Climate change · Environmental policy · Equity · Just transition

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Justice is a central starting point for the consideration of ethical and legal responsibility. Climate change is the result of collective human practices, and the policies to achieve climate targets have distributive consequences. Consequently, it appears natural to approach the related ethical and political issues as matters of justice on a range of levels from the structural, through the international and national, to the private sector and the individual (Andonova et al. 2017, Nyfors et al. 2020, cf. Rydenfelt 2023). Conceptions of global and international justice have shaped the development of the international regime on climate change mitigation and adaptation, including the United Nations Framework Convention on

Climate Change (UNFCCC), the notion of 'common but differentiated responsibility' codified in the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, and the language of the 2015 Paris Agreement (Okereke & Coventry 2016, cf. Ciplet et al. 2013). Justice is also a central concept in the implementation of climate policy, particularly in terms of the notion of a 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy and society (Stevis & Felli 2015, European Commission 2020).

Contemporary societies' grasp of justice with respect to climate change nevertheless remains limited. In documents on climate policy, the notion is seldom explicated in detail. Environmental ethicists and legal scholars have developed theoretical visions of global justice that delineate the responsibility of different nations based on their historical and present

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emissions, vulnerability, affluence and so on (e.g. Posner & Sunstein 2007, Moellendorf 2012). Previous research has provided accounts of different views of justice involved in climate policy documents, political discussions and scholarly debates (Okereke & Dooley 2009, Okereke 2010, Burnham et al. 2013, Eckersley 2013, Gough 2013). However, Western societal and political arrangements — as well as the views and attitudes of individuals and groups — rely on conceptions of justice inherited from past centuries of Western philosophical, legal and political thought. As climate change encounters these views, agreements and oppositions arise, stimulating acceptance and rejection of policies and motivating individual responses. Yet, there is little empirical study on the way that awareness of climate change may act as a catalyst for the transformation of ethical and political opinion. It has recently been argued that the studies of justice 'have been at the periphery rather than the centre of global change research' (Dirth et al. 2020, p. 1). A central challenge for developing such research is there is no commonly agreed upon theoretical framework of justice for environmental change and related policy (Biermann & Kalfagianni 2020, Dirth et al. 2020).

This research develops a novel framework of justice by way of both theoretical and empirical inquiry. We present an initial outline of central conceptions of distributive justice derived from past centuries of Western thought, and then develop this framework in terms of an empirical study that traces the views of a selected group of relevant actors, including high-ranking politicians, leaders, researchers and activists. Research on environmental justice has underscored that predominant conceptions of justice regarding climate change, including those that drive the international regime, emanate from the global North (Ikeme 2003, Newell et al. 2021). Moreover, research has drawn to the fore the relevance of insights derived from frequently marginalised indigenous perspectives (McGregor et al. 2020). Nevertheless, as our study centres on the evolution of justice perspectives within Finland's political and societal 'mainstream', our theoretical framework is anchored in Western conceptions. In the next section, we present our framework which builds on a recently proposed map of conceptions of justice (Häyry 2018, 2021, Rydenfelt 2021). We then detail our qualitative study focusing on the debate on climate policy in Finland, providing a manageable setting for tracing the ways conceptions of justice may be invoked to justify and argue for different stances towards climate policy. In the final section, we discuss how this theoretical framework

enables identifying the conceptions of justice underlying the different visions and discourses examined, while we also highlight the ways in which traditional conceptions are redefined and transformed in light of environmental change.

## 2. CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Contemporary research on environmental change often focuses on particular perspectives on justice, typically calling for their further employment in policy and practice (e.g. Williams & Doyon 2019, cf. McCauley & Heffron 2018, Routledge et al. 2018). With a couple of notable exceptions discussed below, the literature does not provide a framework that enables differentiation among central conceptions of distributive justice and their identification in empirical data. To develop such a framework, we draw from a map distinguishing between 6 abstract conceptions of justice developed in the past centuries of Western thought recently proposed by Matti Häyry (2018, 2021). We have substantially developed this map into a theoretical framework that enables distinction between the features that particular societal and individual views of distributive justice may reflect and combine (Fig. 1).

### 2.1. Capitalism

Capitalism, in this framework, refers to the view that a just distribution takes place in a free market, enabling the distribution of material goods in accordance with individual achievement and choice. It is closely connected with a defence of the right to private property, often based on the ideals of classical liberalism, such as John Locke's (1689) view of natural rights, including the right to property that is derived from labour. Positioned in this corner are also contemporary libertarians such as Robert Nozick (Nozick 1974) who consider a just distribution of goods and burdens to be the outcome of free agreements between consenting individuals.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Nozick (1974, p. 160–164) famously argues against the whole notion of 'distributive' justice as an attempt to redistribute goods without taking into account their production, which, in his view, is the basis of entitlement. However, his view is not far from the notion that everyone is entitled to what they are able to obtain in free voluntary interactions with others.

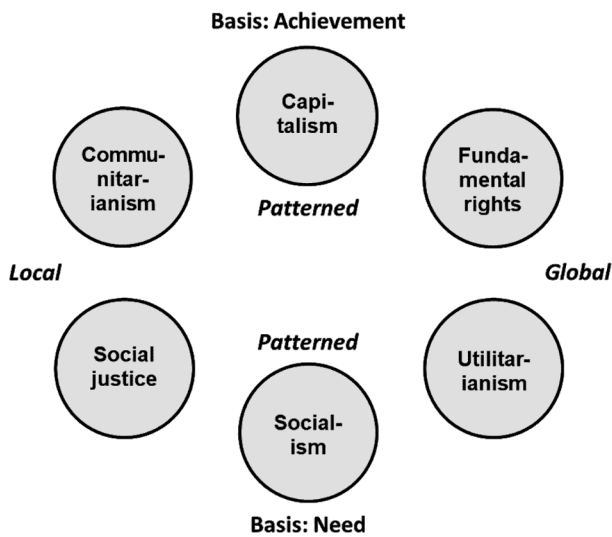


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework of the 6 abstract conceptions of justice indicating their points of agreement and contention, and the axes of various conflicts with respect to policy

### 2.2. Socialism

Socialism here refers to the idea that in a just society, each individual would receive material goods according to their needs, in line with the slogan popularised by Karl Marx to describe the conditions of communism: from each according to his ability, to each according to his need (Marx 1875). While Marx did not propose socialism as an account of justice, this dictum has been the starting point of later socialist views of justice (e.g. Gilabert 2015). Although 'capitalism' and 'socialism' are often used to refer to economic systems and related societal arrangements, they are here employed to designate conceptions of a just distribution.

### 2.3. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism maintains that morally right actions produce the most measurable good. While early utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham (1789) and John Stuart Mill (1863) identified the good with happiness or 'utility', many contemporary utilitarians argue that the central good is well-being, usually understood as the satisfaction of needs, which they suggest assessing in an impersonal fashion. As an account of justice, utilitarianism maintains that a just distribution of goods and burdens is the one that produces the most overall good.

### 2.4. Fundamental rights

Contemporary fundamental rights views of justice are indebted to John Rawls' (1971) defence of justice as fairness. Much subsequent discussion has concentrated on the second of Rawls's 2 principles of justice, which maintains that divergence from social equality is only acceptable when the resulting inequalities are of benefit to the least advantaged members of the society. However, the primary, first principle demands that each person has the same claim to equal fundamental rights and liberties—including freedoms of political participation—that are compatible with the same liberties for all. These 'primary goods' are to be secured by a just arrangement of political and social institutions.

### 2.5. Communitarianism

Communitarianism developed around a central criticism of Rawls' position, and liberalism in general, by critics such as Michael Sandel (1981) and Michael Walzer (1983), now commonly referred to as communitarians, who proposed that our communities are the starting points of our moral and political views. As an account of justice, communitarianism maintains that the traditions and values of the local community provide the basis for distribution and the conceptions of the central goods that such distribution encompasses.

### 2.6. Social justice

While all of the differentiated accounts involve visions of social justice, the label is used here to refer to views that focus on inequalities between groups and minorities (see Chancel 2020), encompassing a family of contemporary accounts that focus on rights central to personal development and societal and political decision-making. Critical of universal accounts, these views typically maintain that the relevant capacities should be defined by the groups themselves, including minorities and oppressed groups. This family of views has many points of departure, including Carol Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care, Iris Young's (1990) account of structural injustices and Nancy Fraser's (2000) arguments for a conception of justice that includes the recognition of individuals and groups as full partners in social interaction. A fertile source for views based on both social justice and fundamental rights is the capability approach proposed by Amartya Sen (2005) and Mar-

tha Nussbaum (2006), who argue for the assessment of social policy in terms of its influence on capability development. While Sen (2005) has refused to give a conclusive list of capabilities, Nussbaum's (2006) account relies on 'essential' human traits and needs and has (partially) universal aspirations, which align it closer to fundamental rights conceptions.

### 2.7. Comparing the positions in Fig. 1

The theoretical power of this framework lies in its comprehensiveness combined with conceptual clarity that makes the contrasts between its nodes easily discernible. In our interpretation and development, the conceptions below the horizontal axis in Fig. 1 maintain that a fair distribution takes place in accordance with need. In accounts based on social justice, the relevant needs are identified by the members of the group themselves, in socialist views, the needs are defined by the collective and its institutions, while contemporary utilitarian views promote the impersonal, scientific assessment of relevant needs. By contrast, the conceptions above the horizontal axis maintain that the basis of distribution is achievement. Communitarians hold that this achievement is defined by the values of the community; in capitalism, the achievement is assessed on the market, while fundamental rights conceptions argue that all humans are deserving of central goods by virtue of being human.

A second difference pertains to the perspectives of these conceptions on the recipients of goods and burdens, giving rise to 3 alternative stances. The views on the right side of Fig. 1 are global: fundamental rights and utilitarian conceptions aspire to secure a just distribution of goods and burdens to everyone. They also invite universal accounts of what the relevant goods include. Capitalism and socialism, situated in the middle, provide a patterned account: goods are to be distributed in accordance with the characteristics (achievements or needs) of the individual in question, typically within the context of a particular society. The 2 views on the left, communitarianism and social justice, offer a local stance. The pertinent recipients are the members of a group or community, and the relevant goods are identified based on the values of the community or group in question. However, the basic view of the nature of the good connects the conceptions on the opposite sides of Fig. 1 (Rydenfelt 2021). Capitalism and socialism concentrate on the distribution of material goods as desired and needed by individuals. Fundamental rights

and social justice conceptions both call for rights, liberties, capabilities and (political) participation. Finally, utilitarianism and communitarianism share a conception of the good as well-being.

This framework has important parallels in the literature on environmental policy. In a rare, systematic ethical analysis of conceptions of justice in negotiations on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) under the UNFCCC, Okeke & Dooley (2010, p. 84) distinguish 6 established notions of distributive justice: utilitarianism, liberal egalitarianism, market justice, communitarianism, justice as 'meeting needs', and as 'mutual advantage'. Five of these accounts are comparable to those identified here: utilitarianism, fundamental rights views, capitalism, communitarianism and socialism, respectively. Yet, justice as mutual advantage, which Okeke and Dooley identify with David Gauthier's (1987) account, is here omitted as a separate conception, while the broad family of views based on social justice forms a sixth node. In a recent account calling for a parsimonious theoretical framework for empirical research on justice in global change, Biermann & Kalfagianni (2020) distinguish between 5 conceptions based on 'core justice statements': Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism, its global extension or 'cosmopolitanism', the capabilities approach as presented by Nussbaum and Sen, libertarianism largely identifying with Nozick's position, and the perspective of critical theory and theories of recognition. Many of the details of the positions discussed are, again, comparable to the conceptions distinguished in our framework.<sup>2</sup> However, this account relies on listing the different goals and mechanisms; the present framework provides a more economical way of discerning their affinities and contrasts.

In addition to its parsimony, our framework provides some initial understanding of how these notions may be reflected in present proposals for climate change policy. The 2 conceptions that we refer to as capitalism and socialism focus on the distribution of material goods and services; they may be seen to underwrite the creation of arrangements such as

<sup>2</sup>Liberal egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism are comparable to views based on fundamental rights. The perspectives of critical theory and theories of recognition belong to what we call social justice conceptions, with the capabilities approach combining elements of both. Libertarianism may be identified with the capitalist conception. However, the communitarian, utilitarian and socialist conceptions are not distinguished, although the accounts that advocate a needs-based minimum principle of justice and those that Biermann & Kalfagianni (2020) place under the cosmopolitan view have affinities with socialist views.

emission trading schemes that combine free markets with governmental control. The capitalist and market-driven paradigm finds resonance in the research paradigm of ecological modernisation, which maintains that the maturation of a capitalist economy can lead to enhanced ecological performance and inquires into the sociopolitical processes enabling this 'modernisation' within the fabric of capitalist liberal democracies (Mol 2002). On the other hand, the socialist conception, with its emphasis on addressing needs, is manifested in ecosocialism, which melds economic strategies based on social needs with ecological equilibrium (Löwy 2005). By contrast, from the point of view of the conceptions focused on fundamental rights and social justice, the central goods are viewed in terms of the effects of climate change and policy on human rights (Robinson & Shine 2018). It has been argued that the goods in question must include increased capabilities in decision-making on environment by both researchers (Paavola & Adger 2006, Bulkeley et al. 2014, Brown & Spiegel 2019) and environmental justice movements (Schlosberg 2013, cf. Routledge et al. 2018, Hess et al. 2022).

The framework also provides initial apprehension of potential transformations of conceptions of justice with respect to environmental change and policy. One possibility is the inclusion of environmental considerations and 'goods' in a just distribution. A second is the inclusion of non-humans among the recipients of justice (Baxter 2005). This is conceptually feasible especially for the global views. It has been argued that fundamental rights belong to non-human animals (Regan 1983, Fitz-Henry 2022) or that citizenship rights should be assigned to (domesticated) animals (Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011); proponents of utilitarianism have maintained that animals as sentient beings merit moral consideration (Singer 1975). By contrast, from the perspective of local views, extending justice in this fashion would require including non-humans into the relevant communities. A third potential line of development is intergenerational justice: the inclusion of future generations among the recipients of a fair distribution (Page 2007, Clark 2021). From the perspective of the views below the horizontal axis in Fig. 1, the needs of future generations may appear immediately salient in a just distribution, while, from the point of view of the remaining conceptions, future individuals do not yet possess any achievements to be taken into account.

Equipped with this initial understanding of the conceptions of justice, the task of our study is to explore whether they are reflected in an actual debate on climate policy, how the theoretical framework is to be

refined based on actual articulations and discourses, and how different standpoints concerning justice may themselves be transformed by the awareness of environmental change.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study traces the articulations of justice in arguments on and attitudes towards proposals concerning environmental policy in a Western democracy. Its empirical context is the debate on climate change mitigation and adaptation in Finland. Because of the comparably small size of the Finnish society, this debate — encompassing all directions of the political spectrum and the voices of experts and activists — provides an opportunity to trace the ways different conceptions of justice are invoked and how those conceptions may themselves be shifting in light of environmental change.

Climate policy became one of the most salient debates in Finnish national politics before the parliamentary elections in April 2019. The government formed after the election — commonly characterised as a left-wing coalition — has set a national 'carbon neutrality' target by 2035.<sup>3</sup> The debate on the target and the measures continues both between the government and the opposition, with the opposition Finns Party resisting the target as too ambitious, and between the political parties forming the government. While the coalition government is led by the Social Democratic Party, the division within the government has been identified as an opposition between 2 other parties: the Greens, who have long urged extensive climate policy, and the centre-right Centre Party, which largely represents rural communities. While all aspects of policy continue to be discussed, during the course of the study, the effects of climate measures were made concrete by a sharp decrease in peat production, due to the rising costs of emission allowances, that is estimated to affect the employment of several thousand individuals nationwide.

#### 3.1. Selection of study participants

As our aim was to trace the ways considerations of justice are invoked in these debates and how these

<sup>3</sup>Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government 2019, section 3.1. Accessed 1 August 2023. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/implementation-of-the-government-programme>.

considerations may themselves be developing in light of environmental change, we decided to focus on a small number of participants in order to conduct in-depth interviews with each. The study is based on discussions with 11 individuals selected based on their participation in debates concerning climate policy, their ability to articulate their views and their potentially differing perspectives on the role of justice in climate change mitigation and adaptation (Table 1). Nine participants were identified through their participation in public discussions in publications, newspapers and social media. Two activist participants were selected based on their responses to an invitation sent to the mailing list of a Finnish grassroots activism network, which can be characterised as focusing on strong sustainability, in order to include voices that present alternatives to 'mainstream' visions. Three participants are best characterised as professional politicians, 2 have a strong background in business and major NGO leadership, 3 are engaged in research in fields related to climate change and 3 represent 'grassroots' activism. The lines between experts, politicians and activists are not clear cut, however. Some of the politician participants have degrees in related fields of research; the experts were also notably active in politically oriented debate. Moreover, the role of 1 participant as the chairman of the

board of one of the largest companies in the country involves political influence and visibility.

In line with our understanding that individuals' views of justice may combine elements from several conceptions, we did not expect the participants to exemplify any specific stance; they were assumed to represent a variety of views that reflect developments in different directions. The participants obviously represent a small sample of the potential breadth of views on justice in relation to environmental policy within Finnish society. With a research task such as this, a point of saturation can hardly be defined or detected. However, the participants provided perceptive and compelling articulations that enabled us to trace the ways in which considerations of justice are invoked in this debate, enabling us to bring them into interplay with the notions appearing in our theoretical framework. Choosing participants in this manner entails that the data predominantly encompasses the views of individuals whose perspectives are already recognized in discussions pertaining to climate change and associated policy, rather than providing a platform to marginalised voices or to those less frequently acknowledged. Selection of participants based on the researchers' recognition of expected diverse perspectives can potentially introduce bias. To mitigate these concerns, we initially reviewed a

Table 1. Roles and background of study participants

Participant <sup>a</sup>	Role at the time of interview	Background
P1	Member of Parliament	Degree in a field related to climate research
P2	Member of Parliament	Degree in economics, former cabinet minister
P3	Member of Parliament, party leader	Degree in humanities
P4	Chairman of the board, large multinational company	Former or present member of the board of multiple large companies, former member of the leadership of the Confederation of Finnish Industries
P5	Leader of thematic field, state-run think tank	Degree in sciences, experience in different roles related to environment in the private sector
P6	Researcher, professor in the field of environmental economy	Degree in engineering, experience as consultant
P7	Researcher of low-carbon lifestyles and natural resources	Degree in engineering
P8	Researcher, debater and activist on energy policy	Degree in engineering
P9	Member of the governmental round table on climate policy, active member of youth organisations	University student, candidate in municipal elections (Greens)
P10	Activist in a Finnish environmental and sustainability grassroots network	Degree in political science
P11	Activist in a Finnish environmental and sustainability grassroots network	Degree in theology

<sup>a</sup>The participants who may be identifiable based on the information provided have given permission to be presented in this research without protections of anonymity

broader range of potential participants, and our final decisions were anchored in deliberative assessments of representativeness in terms of age, gender, background and (when applicable) political affiliation as well as availability.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

Six of the interviews took place in an office space and 5 on Zoom. The in-person discussions lasted from 75 to 120 min; on Zoom, the discussions ranged from 45 to 90 min. The discussions were video recorded, and key portions were transcribed. The discussions were semi-structured and informal. A number of themes were taken up, with the interviewer asking spontaneous follow-up questions.

A central point of departure for this research is that the meanings attached to climate change and related policies are provided by social practices of discourse and action. For this reason, we traced discursive articulations that constitute and shape these meanings. We did not ask the participants directly about their views of justice: in our experience, such questions do not result in spontaneous responses. Instead, to align the perspectives of participants within our conceptual framework, we engaged them in discussions on the ethical obligations arising from climate change, strategies for distributing these responsibilities and the roles of distinct stakeholders (such as individuals, businesses and governments) in navigating environmental change. Through their articulations that pertained to the recipients of justice, the mechanisms and bases of just distribution, and what they identified as the core goods (or harms) to be distributed, we could connect their viewpoints with the nodes of our framework. To capture potential transformations in conceptions of justice influenced by climate change awareness, we further prompted them to articulate their visions of both ideal (utopian) and adverse (dystopian) futures, along with their perceptions of what constitutes a fulfilling life. Many participants also spontaneously detailed the evolution of their own perspectives.

Our analysis proceeded by labelling and connecting articulations with one another as broader patterns of discourse in critical comparison with our theoretical framework. Finally, quotations were selected and translated to elucidate these themes and patterns. In this way, we sought for patterns that reflected the conceptions of our initial framework, contrasted with them and signalled their current developments, as detailed in the following section.

## 4. ARTICULATIONS OF JUSTICE IN THE FINNISH CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE

In this section, we describe our findings starting with general articulations concerning ethical responsibilities related to environmental change and then focussing on specific themes of distributive justice and climate policy. We also begin to link these articulations with the conceptions included in our framework. A systematic and critical overview is presented in the discussion section.

### 4.1. Climate change and ethical responsibility

The participants articulated the ethical responsibilities with respect to climate change in terms of demands on (1) individual choices and (2) societal structures. These were not considered mutually exclusive; however, justice was typically connected with the latter. Some voiced the view that the responsibility of individuals was too often the focus of public discussions. One participant observed that the focus on individual responsibility has sometimes been deployed to draw attention away from the importance of societal ramifications: measuring of individual carbon footprints 'has become a dominant rhetoric...although, in light of science...it is much more important to talk about the structures that we could change, and that responsibility can never be solely that of the individual' (P9). Another participant articulated an alternative point of view, maintaining that 'in election discussions and political debates, more than an ecological lifestyle and a preference for environmentally and climate friendly options is required of a virtuous person. It is not enough; one has to ensure that one believes in climate change with all one's heart' (P3). The emphasis on individual choices was here connected with politically motivated 'moral posing'.

The discussions made it clear that, with respect to climate change, issues of justice typically pertain to the distribution of 'bads', primarily the burdens of mitigation and adaptation. Even the expected goods or benefits were mostly articulated in terms of the prevention of negative outcomes including the loss of habitability, forced mass migration, political and economic isolation, and conflicts.

Various positions on the differences between individual and societal responsibilities were articulated, reflecting considerations that have emerged in proposals for a global just distribution of burdens related to climate change. These included historical emissions: it was argued to be fair that 'those who've

caused the problem should deal with it' (P5). However, it was also noted that individuals cannot influence the historical emissions of societies. Another consideration was individual and societal wealth: affluent individuals and societies can afford the changes needed. As some participants suggested, at present carbon footprint also 'correlates really well with income, affluence' (P1).

Justice was often identified with the fairness of transition processes and the impact of societal policy. The downturn of peat production presented a timely example. One participant considered this issue as inevitable from the perspective of economic development, arguing that 'in any case, whatever happens with the climate, a vast number of jobs will constantly become needless, and other employment will arise elsewhere' (P4). It was argued that individuals and businesses have been aware of the inevitable changes, while political decision-makers bear some of the responsibility for their lack of preparation: 'If someone invested in peat manufacturing 5 or 10 years ago, what is that person's own responsibility? I can't really say...Is it the responsibility of the manufacturer or of the decision-makers who have sustained the incentives of production?' (P1). Several participants raised the consideration that time is an element of justice: 'If we had instigated [these measures] twenty thirty years ago, we could have had at least a decade for the transition. That could have been a reasonable choice from the perspective of the climate' (P9).

#### 4.2. Reconceiving capitalism: 'What is the alternative?'

One point of divergence and contention concerned the future of capitalistic economic models and economic growth. Many participants noted that climate change is connected to the markets and economic growth. They also expressed varying levels of confidence in the prospects of addressing climate change while sustaining economic growth. Spontaneously posing the question 'To what extent is the global economy a by-product of a fossil-intensive economy?' a politician (P1) among the participants framed the issue succinctly:

'I wouldn't pronounce capitalism dead, as we haven't earnestly attempted to harness it to solve the [climate] problem. But perhaps the 2 go hand in hand. That's when my political map begins to shake—I don't know what the alternative is. What kind of a peaceful transition could take place? How can we change the world so quickly that the societal order changes at the same time as its energy basis changes?'

Some participants argued for a disentanglement of the values in human life from material consumption and emission-heavy practices. One politician among the participants reflected on attempts to reduce material consumption to a minimum by jokingly mentioning that 'the typical example of an ecological lifestyle in a magazine article is someone who lives in a cabin in a forest and grows their own turnips' (P1). While this lifestyle may be commendable, it cannot be scaled to the whole of society: 'If we all did this, we would practically end up in the situation that we're trying to avoid' (P1). However, the participant also reflected on the topic of what is valuable in human life more generally: 'Is one's pursuit of well-being and happiness based on a growing material footprint or not? If the response is no, it is a much better position' (P1).

The participants' articulations reflected the vertical axis of our framework. Those representing right-wing political affiliations and business voiced the most confidence in cap and trade systems in distributing the burdens of cutting back emissions fairly and efficiently. However, they also suggested that the present cost of emissions was too low: 'It should be doubled—then things would begin to happen' (P4). Moreover, while relying on market mechanisms, they emphasised the need for state involvement. Indeed, 1 participant compared contemporary developments in climate change mitigation to the rise of the European welfare state, which was described as a synthesis 'of brutal original capitalism' and socialism. Nevertheless, the participant argued that emissions trading is not a form of socialism: 'It is socialism that polluting has no price, because then we have commons, the atmosphere and the sea,...and there is no price for polluting them. It is much closer to a market economy in that there is also a price for polluting the commons' (P2). This participant also elucidated the transformations of their own views at length:

'Perhaps 15 years ago I would have said more strongly that the individual as a consumer should just be a rational agent who chooses the best services and products...and does not attempt to optimise the whole universe, and it is our task [as politicians] to set the price of external costs to the atmosphere and the seas so that the individual's choice turns to the benefit of the whole....But I have to admit that the older one gets, the more one thinks that human psychology spoils a nice mathematical theory, that the equation is a bit messier. In practice, consumer activism is also needed to guide businesses, as it already has.'

A just distribution was understood as aligning the individual's optimisation of their interests with the benefit of all by the market-based mechanisms set by decision-makers. In intergenerational terms, the



issue was to price emissions to secure the amenities of the present generation 'and all the future generations and their rights' (P2). This view was described as having developed to encompass the relevance of individual choices, articulated in market terminology as consumer activism.

Reflecting a socialist conception, some participants argued that emissions trading does not suffice for our societies to meet the needs of everyone, and further state action is required. One participant claimed that 'all areas should be scrutinised much more drastically and sternly than today' (P11), providing holiday fights as an example. A researcher among the participants, describing their political views as left-wing, compared emissions trading to a single blade of a pair of scissors, arguing that the government should also supply fossil-free energy on a massive scale: 'We have no other means than to start a state-led mobilisation project to a degree that approaches post-war reconstruction or war mobilisation' (P8). Emissions trading was also viewed as unable to tackle the underlying challenges of sustainability. Two researchers among the participants argued for sharing wealth more equally: a society with substantial economic inequalities 'creates an incentive to strive for more, producing a mechanism that, in practice, forces one into this race' (P8), and that the task is to transform the present societal structure, which depends on economic growth: 'People have created it through mutual agreements. Now the issue is about deconstructing it' (P6).

#### **4.3. Global and local: 'Don't we have a shared earth?'**

A clear point of divergence of opinion concerned the scope of the recipients of justice, particularly evident when the participants discussed the fundamental goals of climate action. Many participants maintained that the goal should be the preservation and improvement of global well-being, or 'providing as many humans as possible the opportunity for a good life' (P7). These stances reflected the utilitarian position, and included a shift towards an intergenerational understanding of justice. Enhancing well-being should occur globally: 'Many will probably think that this is a harmful line of thought, but what is the significance of national borders? Don't we have a shared earth?...Should we not come together and see to it that everyone is as well off as possible?' (P5).

Some articulations reflected the global conception that focuses on fundamental rights, capabilities and

freedoms. In a liberal spirit, many participants emphasised that they are not in a position to say what a good life consists of for everyone or what suffices for it: 'I am not able to define what [good life] is or isn't. After all, a human being doesn't need more than heating and food' (P4). One participant articulated their vision of the ideal, utopian world as a 'Star Trek society' where the global present and future generations are provided with the freedom and capability to shape their aspirations: 'It is smarter to aim in a direction rather than at a static goal, as we constantly learn more, and we cannot decide what future generations will want on their behalf. But it is our responsibility not to reduce their freedoms of action impossibly' (P1). Another participant presented a similar stance with regard to individuals: in an ideal world, 'everyone would experience that they've found, if not quite their place, their own thing...that one dares to dream and hope' (P9).

The participants commonly focused on human beings as the relevant recipients of the goods that climate action would engender, often articulating this stance explicitly. Arguing for climate policy that would preserve the habitability of the planet, 1 participant noted: 'I recognise that my stance is the human-centred view of someone who has been raised in the era of the Anthropocene' (P6). However, especially the activist participants stressed the importance of a balanced and reciprocal relationship with one's environment. This stance introduced a local element, including a return to more localised consumption with the ideal of 'a lively countryside which provides reasonably sized towns with what they have, and reasonably sized towns provide the people in the countryside with what they need' (P11).

Distinctly marking the local end of the horizontal axis, a communitarian perspective was reflected in the articulations of 1 politician among the participants. Discussing undesirable futures, the participant painted a bleak picture of a Europe altered by mass migration wherein 'income inequality has grown considerably and those who have money protect themselves within walls in their own neighbourhoods, and the notion of a Nordic, well-being society has been buried' (P3). However, this concern was not connected with climate change but with the 'the lack of perspectives related to bad government, violence, lack of security, underdeveloped economy' in other countries (P3). It was argued that emissions trading will be effective in reducing emissions 'only within Europe, perhaps in North America and in a couple of other regions where this matter is being approached in this idealistic fashion' (P3). Any special ethical

responsibility of these regions was also contested with reference to notions of (global) justice. As the same participant (P3) continued:

'The responsibility does lie collectively with all of us, but this is a matter that is approached a bit too much from the perspective of moral responsibility and guilt....This is easily seen as a question of justice. Because industrialisation began in Europe and North America,...the greatest responsibility is claimed to belong to these regions, despite the fact that they have been able to rein in the growth of their emissions, even reduce emissions.'

While this participant connected local well-being with environmentally friendly choices, both the relevance and the responsibility of Finnish society in reducing emissions were questioned.

#### 4.4. Redistributing power: 'Can we build a sustainable civilisation that is not fair?'

Many of the participants articulated justice in terms of the distribution of power and influence that are central to views based on social justice and fundamental rights. One researcher participant discussed the issue of power at length, arguing that 'we should aim to distribute power, including economic power, more equally among people' (P8) and that:

'When we hit the limits of the planet,...sooner or later,... we must begin to distribute the chips on the market more equally, or we have to move a part of the distribution of resources off the market—for example, so that basic needs can be satisfied without money—or, as a third option, we must impose such forcible measures and discipline that we can keep the poor in check. Option 3 is commonly called fascism.'

The participant drew a connection between redistributing power and sustainability, noting: 'I don't believe that we can build a sustainable civilisation that is not fair' (P8). Nevertheless, it was also noted that environmental sustainability could be achieved by unjust means. Participant P8 stated:

'I believe that if democracy worked better and power was genuinely distributed more equally, we could make more sustainable decisions. And what is the alternative? Perhaps China's model is an alternative, and it may of course work. Perhaps it will turn out to be more sustainable, if we cannot fix our own system. The foundation of that model is coercive power, where experts or those who present themselves as experts know what is best for people.'

The equity of power in present Western societies was viewed as insufficient. Despite 'a nominal democracy, where we vote every 4 years' (P8), people have too little democratic control on societal practices, including over how they 'spend 8 hours of their day' (P8).

Two activists among the participants also articulated their desire to extend some fundamental rights or capabilities to nature, including the right to 'have a say' (P10) to counterbalance the arrogance of humans: 'In the end it is a moral question of understanding that we need to live together. Humans have a "species hubris"' (P10). This transformation was connected to achieving sustainability by sufficiency, seeking enough for a good life without exceeding ecological limits: 'we are part of a big living network and functioning in it requires taking into account the other species, and the conditions they require to live; in a way this automatically leads to sufficiency, because...we are forced to adjust our own actions in relation to the others' (P10).

#### 5. DISCUSSION: THE FRAMEWORK OF JUSTICE AND THE FINNISH CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE

Despite being confined to a limited number of individuals in a geographically limited area with its particular societal policies, social identities and styles of political debate, our results indicate that the articulations of policies and mechanisms of a just distribution, and visions of good and bad futures with respect to climate change could be connected with the conceptions appearing in our theoretical framework (Table 2). In particular, they clearly reflected its 2 main axes. The participants with right-leaning political affinities highlighted markets as potential starting points for climate change mitigation, while participants with left-wing political leanings argued for more government-led policy and state projects. A clear opposition was also displayed between global and local stances. The utilitarian approach was present in the focus on global well-being, while fundamental rights conceptions were reflected in global capabilities and opportunities that were articulated as central aims of climate action. These global stances found a sharp contrast in a communitarian approach that viewed the good in terms of a Nordic conception of the 'well-being society'. A further set of articulations focused on the notion that sustainability requires a more equal distribution of both political and economic power, combining issues of social justice and fundamental rights with elements of socialist conceptions.

In many ways, however, the participants' articulations also refined and redefined the notions of justice we set out with. This was evident, first of all, in the articulations concerning the market-based views of a just distribution. Participants inclined towards the

Table 2. Mechanisms, goals and key transformations of the conceptions of justice

Conception of justice	Mechanisms and means	Goals and central goods	Key transformations
Capitalism	Emissions trading, market mechanism	Distributing goods and burdens in a way that benefits the society	Intergenerational justice
Socialism	State policies curtailing emissions and increasing non-fossil energy supply Distributing economic power	Meeting needs within society	Intergenerational justice
Utilitarianism	Emissions trading, state action and individual choices	Meeting needs globally	Global and intergenerational justice
Fundamental rights	Emissions trading, state action and individual choices	Promoting freedoms and capabilities globally	Global and intergenerational justice Rights of animals and nature, particularly in decision-making
Communitarianism	Emissions trading (with misgivings)	Preserving the well-being of the local society	Environmental considerations as part of well-being
Social justice	Distributing economic-political power	Meeting local and community needs	Inclusion of nature in decision-making, recognition of non-human needs

capitalist conception noted that capitalist societies have the potential to substantially improve their ecological sustainability through technological evolution, a sentiment in line with (at least ‘first-generation’) visions of ecological modernisation (cf. Mol 2002). However, their outlook on technology was not overtly positive, and they believed that meaningful change would not arise purely from market and economic forces without additional incentives from the direction of policy and the consumers. A central example of such developments was emissions trading, which was expected to benefit those cutting their emissions, reducing emissions overall. Nevertheless, the creation and sustenance of this market requires governmental intervention. Emission allowances are not a market commodity that people or businesses would acquire without related policy, and policy-makers would need to set the price of emissions at a level that ‘optimises’ the benefits.

By contrast, many participants envisioned comprehensive alternatives to the present societal structures based on economic growth from the direction of the conceptions of justice that are focused on meeting needs. In particular, many of their articulations fall under the conception we have discussed under the title of ‘socialism’, often reflecting contemporary approaches of ecosocialism (cf. Löwy 2005), but also introducing dimensions of the more recent development of the notion of a degrowth or ‘post-growth’ society where ecological limits thoroughly shape societal policy (cf. Dukelow & Murphy 2022). It deserves to be underscored that, relative to the long

history of the conceptions of justice we have distinguished, the emergence of the notion of limits marks a novel and relatively contemporary shift: the traditional conceptions do not incorporate references to the constraints on growth or the limits of goods to be distributed. This fact may also underpin our observation that, while current structures were perceived as both historical and amendable, imagining the social agreements producing the alternative was also considered challenging.

The notion of ecological limits also motivated views of justice that were articulated in terms of (re)distributing power, both economic and political, more evenly with the aim of securing environmental sustainability. These stances echo proposals made in related research: for example, the contention in the study of forest governance and carbon projects that societal justice is required for sustainability (Marion Suiseeya & Caplow 2013, p. 969). However, a necessary connection between distributing power and sustainability has also been problematised (cf. Ciplest & Harrison 2020). Other potential routes to sustainability—such as strong state power and control over individual actions—were considered possible but rejectable, as the resulting societal condition would not be viable from the perspective of justice.

The debate on climate policy also indicated related shifts in both global and local conceptions of justice. In particular, the articulations that drew from fundamental rights focussed on the general capabilities of humans to pursue their aspirations instead of specific rights of political participation. The contrasting local

and communitarian perspective combined a focus on local well-being with a distrust of notions of global justice that recalls the socio-economic development characterised by the climate research scenario of 'regional rivalry' (Shared Socioeconomic Pathway 3, SSP3) where achieving regional goals is strongly prioritised over broader development (Riahi et al. 2017). However, even the local and communitarian approach displayed a shift towards articulating environmental goods and environmentally friendly choices as elements of well-being.

Articulations of justice in relation to environmental change lead to revisions and refinements to our framework. Our initial understanding of the framework provided the presumption that the global accounts of justice, in particular, could transform to include non-humans as recipients of justice. In our analysis, the role of non-humans emerged in the context of views that focus on capabilities and rights in societal decision-making. However, these views also included local stances on social justice underscoring the importance of recognising the needs of non-humans and increasing their 'voice' in decision-making. In turn, in line with our initial presumptions, the views that find the basis of just distribution in need were responsive to issues of intergenerational justice. Nevertheless, related articulations also emerged from a fundamental rights perspective: the rights of future generations were considered relevant to our ethical responsibilities in the present, and were enlisted as a central motivation for present efforts. Moreover, we also detected a clear transformation in capitalist approaches towards long-term intergenerational justice in terms of a call to optimise benefits for both the present and future generations.

Finally, our findings offer several indications concerning the adaptability of these conceptions of justice in tackling global environmental challenges. The capitalist paradigm appears ill-equipped to address such challenges without integrating elements from other conceptualisations or incorporating notions of intergenerational justice. As for the 2 local perspectives—communitarianism and views of social justice—the consideration of environmental issues is contingent upon the values of the specific community or group. Global perspectives positioned on the right side of our analysis are more readily adaptable to global environmental issues, given they are framed in contextually appropriate terms related either to individual rights and capacities (as in fundamental rights perspectives) or consequences on collective well-being (as in utilitarianism).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

As far back as 2 decades ago, it was argued that 'it will be difficult to find a concept that is as misused and misinterpreted as that of equity and environmental justice' (Ikeme 2003, p. 195). Much of the current research literature addressing justice in the context of environmental change champions a specific perspective, advocating for further exploration of its policy implications. Research has only gradually begun to acknowledge the different varieties that conceptions of justice may take (Okereke & Dooley 2010, Biermann & Kalfagianni 2020, Dirth et al. 2020). To date, research lacks a comprehensive theoretical framework of conceptions of justice that could be employed to trace their potential bearing on prevailing policies or their resonance in public discourse and the acceptability of policy proposals with respect to environmental change. As our analysis shows, the framework we have developed enables distinction of the conceptions of justice underlying different views and visions of just distribution, identification of their points of agreement and contention, and recognition of the axes of various conflicts with respect to policy. This holds the promise of applicability in other contexts and lines of research that would examine the differentiated conceptions from the perspectives of ethical and philosophical soundness, potential for political and societal acceptance, as well as capacity in addressing environmental issues, in order to approximate the eventual shape of sound and acceptable policies for just transition.

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