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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

**YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL  
CLIMATE GOVERNANCE: A STUDY ON  
CONTEMPORARY IGO-NGO RELATIONS\***

Buse Mina TÜMKAYA\*\*

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**Abstract**

The relationships between youth environmental movements and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) in the global climate governance framework are complex. Focusing on movements such as Extinction Rebellion (XR), Fridays for Future (FFF), Last Generation (LG), and Just Stop Oil (JSO), this article examines how these groups use contemporary tactics and mass mobilization to influence policy and public opinion. Utilizing the theoretical framework of Tana Johnson, this research categorizes and analyzes the intricate relations between these movements and IGOs through the 4Cs Taxonomy. While trying to determine which category these relations fall into (cooperative, co-optative, competitive, or conflictual), the study also follows the shifts between categories over time and their reasons.

\* This article is based on a master's thesis completed with the valuable guidance and feedback of Dr. İlkin Özdikmenli Çelikoğlu.

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**Keywords:** Youth Environmental Movements, Intergovernmental Organizations, Non-governmental Organizations, Climate Change, Global Climate Governance

## **Küresel İklim Yönetişiminde Gençliğin Rolü: Hükümetler Arası Kuruluşlar ile Sivil Toplum Örgütleri İlişkileri**

### **Öz**

Küresel iklim yönetişimi çerçevesinde çevreci gençlik hareketleri ile hükümetlerarası kuruluşlar (HGK) arasındaki ilişkiler karmaşık bir yapıya sahiptir. Extinction Rebellion (XR), Fridays for Future (FFF), Last Generation (LG) ve Just Stop Oil (JSO) gibi hareketlere odaklanan bu makale, bu grupların politika ve kamuoyunu etkilemek için çağdaş taktiklerden ve kitlesel mobilizasyondan nasıl yararlandıklarını incelemektedir. Tana Johnson'ın kuramsal çerçevesini kullanan bu araştırma, söz konusu bu hareketler ile HGK arasındaki karmaşık ilişkileri, Johnson'ın 4C Taksonomisi aracılığıyla kategorize ve analiz etmeyi amaçlar. Bu çalışma, incelenen bu ilişkilerin hangi kategoriye (işbirlikçi, kooptatif, rekabetçi veya çatışmacı) girdiğini belirlemeye çalışırken, zaman içinde kategoriler arasındaki değişimlerin ve bunların nedenlerinin de izini sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çevreci Gençlik Hareketleri, Hükümetlerarası Kuruluşlar, Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları, İklim Değişikliği, Küresel İklim Yönetişimi

### **Introduction**

Global governance evolved drastically in the past century as non-state actors' power expanded with classical state institutions. Among them, youth environmental movements have emerged as critical actors. Movements such as Extinction Rebellion (XR), Fridays for Future (FFF), Last Generation (LG), and Just Stop Oil (JSO) have both raised public awareness and pressured intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to adopt more ambitious climate policies. Amidst these developments, the influential role of youth has been recognized by the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) António Guterres, who stated that “[c]limate change is the fight of our lives, and young people have been on the frontlines leading the charge for climate justice” (United Nations, 2019).

Recognizing the role of youth as political actors in climate governance, this study examines how these movements influence and challenge global climate governance structures. It explores whether significant differences exist in their relationships with IGOs, ranging from cooperation to conflict. While disruptive tactics help some groups gain visibility and attract media attention, these same strategies might also limit their opportunity for formal engagement with IGOs and contribute to the dismissal of their demands. The study also explores whether different approaches among youth movements influence their legitimacy and effectiveness within institutional frameworks. The research does this by applying Tana Johnson's 4Cs taxonomy—*cooperation*, *co-optation*, *competition*, and *conflict*—as the primary theoretical lens. This framework enables a nuanced analysis of the complex and dynamic relationships between youth movements and IGOs. By analyzing these dynamics through Johnson's 4Cs taxonomy, this article aims to provide a fresh perspective on the interactions between environmental NGOs and IGOs.

The article is organized as follows. The first section provides a theoretical and historical overview of NGO-IGO relations and introduces the 4Cs taxonomy. The second section justifies the case selection and presents the hypotheses of the study. The third section examines IGOs' historical responses to climate change to display the role of IGOs and NGOs in climate governance as well as the limitations of these responses. The fourth section introduces the four movements, analyzing their objectives, tactics, and major operations. The final section applies the 4Cs framework to their interactions with IGOs, evaluates the findings, and addresses the research questions.

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

NGOs are typically defined as nonprofit organizations which function autonomously from government control. The scope of their role varies across a range of issues, including human rights, environmental protection, and social justice. As Gordenker and Weiss (1995) emphasize, NGOs often bridge the political gap between the local and the global, involving the community in international decision-making processes. The rise of NGOs in global governance was not entirely spontaneous and bottom-up but often supported by IGOs and donor states that actively promoted the NGO sector as a solution to governance gaps, especially in the Global South (Reimann, 2006). They emerged as critical players during the post-World War II period, leveraging their advocacy and capacities of service delivery to fill governance gaps (Narain, 2012, p. 52). IGOs, on

the other hand, are formal institutions created by sovereign states through treaties to implement collective decisions, and their legitimacy is rooted in international law and structured bureaucracies (Badie, 2023, p. 12).

The interaction between IGOs and NGOs is complex. Their relationship is complementary in the sense that NGOs provide expertise, innovation, and bottom-up legitimacy, while IGOs provide access, funding, and institutional leverage. As Narain (2012, p. 50) and Gordenker and Weiss (1995, p. 554) explain, NGOs increasingly participate in global decision-making through consultative status, observer roles, and partnerships. Technological advances and globalization further enhanced the presence of NGOs in the late 20th century. Digital tools paved way to transnational advocacy networks that helped NGOs increase their reach and impact in policymaking (Reimann, 2006, p. 50; Narain, 2012, p. 54). These developments also contributed to the emergence of pro-NGO norms in international relations, which legitimized their roles as participants in global governance (Reimann, 2006, p. 59).

However, despite these advancements, IGOs are usually the ones to dominate agenda-setting and resource allocation. Reimann (2006, p. 63) critiques this dynamic, arguing that NGO-IGO relations frequently lead to reliance on IGOs, creating a pressure to align with IGO priorities, where IGOs often require NGOs to adhere to bureaucratic procedures that constrain grassroots flexibility (Reimann, 2006, p. 59). Other scholars argue that IGOs lack transparency and have a resistance to civil society demands, (Gordenker and Weiss, 1995, p. 553). Power imbalances among NGOs are yet another concern. NGOs from the Global South face significant barriers in accessing to IGOs, including limited funding, underrepresentation, and political marginalization (Farrell & Newman, 2014, pp. 333–336).

These trends and tensions are especially evident in the realm of climate governance. IGOs like the UNFCCC provide institutional platforms for global climate efforts, but NGOs argue these forums fail to deliver change. The incrementalism and institutional inertia of IGOs are seen by many as insufficient to meet the climate emergency (Badie, 2023, p. 14; Fisher, 2010; Nulman, 2022, p. 191).

To better understand the dynamics between the NGOs and IGOs in global climate action, this study draws on Tana Johnson's 4Cs taxonomy, consisting of cooperation, co-optation, competition, and conflict. Johnson (2016, pp. 742–746) categorizes IGO-NGO interactions across a spectrum of alignment and tension. While *cooperation* defines shared

objectives and pooled resources, *co-optation* refers to the NGOs that are included to serve IGO legitimacy but lose autonomy. As *competition* indicates the process that actors compete for influence, legitimacy, or public attention, *conflict* implies that fundamental value clashes result in open confrontation. Table 1 summarizes the description of each dynamic.

Dynamic	Description of the dynamic
<b>Cooperation</b>	IGOs and NGOs align objectives and pool resources to achieve shared goals, leveraging NGOs' expertise and IGOs' legitimacy, funding, and access to decision-making.
<b>Co-optation</b>	IGOs subsume NGO agendas to maintain control or legitimacy, increasing NGO visibility but limiting autonomy and transformative advocacy.
<b>Competition</b>	IGOs and NGOs compete for resources, legitimacy, or public influence due to resource scarcity or diverging objectives.
<b>Conflict</b>	Fundamental disagreements over values, priorities, or strategies lead to open confrontations between IGOs and NGOs.

**Table 1:** Johnson's 4Cs Taxonomy

This framework allows us to move beyond normative assessments of NGO-IGO relations and analyze specific interaction patterns within the climate governance context. Johnson demonstrates the 4Cs with reference to historical cases, particularly focusing on the relations between the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN and NGOs. There existed cooperation in the 1960s through resource and information exchange between the FAO and NGOs. Co-optation could be observed when in the 1970s the FAO became reliant on resources from Industrial Cooperative Program, sidelining other NGOs. Competition between trade unions and development NGOs over donor funding or public visibility was in play. Lastly, conflict occurred in the 1980s–1990s when environmental NGOs like Friends of the Earth and Sierra Club criticized the FAO and called for other member states to cut off funding. Research so far has not observed these varying dynamics through Johnson's taxonomy within climate

governance, which this article aims to provide for further analysis.

## Research Design

To explore how youth environmental movements interact with IGOs, this study applies the 4Cs framework to four prominent NGOs, covering XR, FFF, LG, and JSO. The decision to focus on these movements was driven by their distinct influence and approaches to addressing climate change. The research is conducted by using Europresse database and provided a comprehensive analysis of these movements across over 7,000 newspaper sources (excluding self-published materials by these groups). This analysis reveals the media attention each movement has received since their formation (see Table 2). showing that a rapid media coverage is often achieved within just two years. Here, Europresse database was used to quantitatively verify media visibility. Qualitative analysis then focused on a smaller sample from this database, targeting critical events (e.g., Conference of Parties (COP) summits, major protest weeks) or drawing directly from the official documents of IGOs and the movements. Their substantial media visibility and varying protest tactics justifies their selection as case studies for this research.

Movement	Year of Formation	Number of News Articles
FFF	2018	18,971
XR	2018	39,889
LG	2021	8,936
JSO	2022	12,653

**Table 2:** Number of News Articles per Group (Europresse Database, 2024).

Each movement provides a distinct lens for examining the 4Cs in action by offering insights into how grassroots advocacy shapes and is shaped by institutional frameworks. This study positions the environmental context as a critical case for understanding how much potential NGO-IGO interactions have in transforming global policies. The hypotheses of the study are as follows:

1. Fridays for Future initially exemplifies cooperative and co-optative dynamics with IGOs. Being a movement that prioritizes global advocacy and education, it appears to be aligning with the objectives of IGOs like the UNFCCC to raise awareness about climate change. It also shows a strong case for analyzing co-optation. While the movement has shown a more interactive relationship with IGOs, instances where its demands are not met by IGOs continue to create tensions between two parties.

2. Last Generation's confrontational style highlights the conflictual and competitive dynamics. Starting off with disruptive protests, the movement later on competes with IGOs for public attention and legitimacy in the political arena, particularly in running for the European Parliament Elections.

3. Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil exemplify conflictual dynamics, especially regarding their criticisms of inadequacies of IGO responses to climate change. The confrontational tactics of movements and direct criticism of IGOs show tensions between conventional governance and youth-led activist groups.

4. This study utilizes various sources to analyze the interactions between IGOs and youth movements, including (1) official IGO documents (e.g., reports from UNFCCC and related bodies), (2) statements and materials from youth movements (e.g., press releases, protest strategies, and speeches), (3) media coverage to capture public narratives and perceived dynamics, and (4) scholarly analysis to contextualize findings within broader trends in NGO-IGO relations. The 4Cs framework guides the examination of these materials, each interaction mapped onto one or more of the four categories in the most accurate way possible. Patterns and changes will subsequently be examined to reveal recurring themes or unique dynamics specific to the climate governance context.

To classify each IGO interaction as cooperative, conflictual, or competitive, specific indicators were used. Table 3 presents these indicators for each C category, including engagement type, visibility, and tactics, providing a transparent operationalization of the 4Cs framework.

Interaction Type	Observable Indicators
Cooperation	Invitations to formal IGO meetings or summits; granting speaking time in consultative or decision-making bodies; providing funding; issuing public supportive statements; awarding or formally recognizing the group.
Co-optation	IGOs incorporating movement language into official documents without granting meaningful access; creating advisory roles that do not influence policy; symbolic consultations; using the movement in public relations material.
Conflictual	Civil disobedience targeting IGO buildings/summits; public accusations against IGO officials; legal challenges filed against IGO actions; movement members being detained during IGO-linked events and framing the IGO as responsible.
Competitive	Competing to shape agenda-setting (e.g., launching counterproposals to IGO initiatives); running candidates or representatives in IGO-related elections; forming coalitions to challenge IGO mandates; producing rival policy frameworks.

**Table 3:** Indicators for Classifying Youth Movement-IGO Interactions.

## IGO Responses to Climate Change in the Past and Present

This section outlines the traditional institutional responses to climate change to show the structural limits of IGOs and clarify why contemporary youth movements increasingly distance themselves from these formal bodies.

The institutional response to climate change has developed over time since the 1950s. It was shaped by scientific progress, geopolitical shifts, and increasing public awareness. Concerns first emerged from postwar atmospheric studies, with the UN's involvement by the early 1970s. In 1974, the UN General Assembly requested the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) to study climate change, which led to the creation of expert panels and laid the groundwork for institutional climate governance (Zillman, 2009, p. 143).

The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 was a turning point in environmental diplomacy. While not specifically focused on climate change, the conference laid the groundwork by discussing the interconnectedness of

environmental issues and the value of international cooperation (Luomi, 2020). It also paved the way for NGO participation through the Environmental Forum and the Peoples' Forum, where groups like Friends of the Earth contributed to global awareness (United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 1972a, 1972b, pp. 3-5).

Through the First World Climate Conference in 1979, the establishment of World Climate Programme, and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, institutionalization of scientific assessment and multilateral dialogue occurred. The IPCC became a central actor, while it has faced criticism over disciplinary bias and geographic imbalances (Hulme & Mahony, 2010, pp. 707-708; Bjurström & Polk, 2011). Still, its reports have influenced major agreements, including the UNFCCC in 1992 and the Paris Agreement in 2015. The IPCC has also increasingly recognized the crucial role of NGOs in its processes, providing them a platform in scientific assessments and policy recommendations. NGOs such as Greenpeace, WWF, and Friends of the Earth have participated as observers, which actively contributed to the IPCC's reports and special assessments (Sanwal & Wang, 2017).

Despite the significant advancements in international environmental law in the late 1980s, the scale and scope of environmental conventions were highly insignificant and lacked the specificity and precision needed for tackling climate change (Zaelke & Cameron, 1990, p. 249; Magraw, 1989). This led to the necessity for negotiating a new treaty to address climate change legally. The 1992 UNFCCC was a legal milestone, as it introduced some of the most prominent principles in global climate governance such as Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), and obligated developed countries to support vulnerable nations (Sands, 1992), thus became a legal milestone. Yet, its non-binding structure and vague commitments caused delay and uneven implementation. In response, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol was adopted to operationalize the UNFCCC's goals through binding emission targets. However, it consequently failed to achieve broad compliance by excluding developing countries (Böhringer, 2003).

Building on these challenges, COP15 in Copenhagen (2009) showed the weaknesses of IGO-led negotiations. Copenhagen Accord lacked ambition and transparency (Fisher, 2010), and the exclusion of NGOs from central negotiations also fueled dissatisfaction. Throughout the years, the role of civil society and NGOs grew, but not necessarily in a positive way. NGOs were present as symbolic actors but not as empowered

decision-makers. Their inclusion usually depended on the level of alignment they had with institutional norms, which silenced more radical or marginalized voices (Reimann, 2006; Fisher, 2010).

The 2015 Paris Agreement adopted a bottom-up approach based on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), many of which did not achieve the 2°C or 1.5°C goals (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2016, Article 4; Seo, 2017, p. 9). It has been criticized for depending on “naming and shaming” rather than legal obligations, hence, its lack of ability to enforce its provisions was highlighted (Bodansky, 2016; Luomi, 2020; Seo, 2017, p. 9).

The Katowice Rulebook was published after COP24. This meeting established transparency frameworks and reporting procedures. The Glasgow Pact was announced after COP26, and it addressed phasing down coal and enhanced finance but again without robust enforcement. Meanwhile, activists from the Global South, Indigenous peoples, and youth movements continued to emphasize equity, loss and damage, and intergenerational justice, countering elitism of IGO spaces (Nidhi, 2023; Arora & Mishra, 2021).

Finally, COP28 in Dubai was both progress and paradox. Although it was the first official acknowledgment of fossil fuels as drivers of climate change, it also faced backlash due to being led by Sultan Al-Jaber of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, and for potential conflicts of interest, as approximately 2,400 delegates from fossil fuel companies attended the summit (Smeeth & Haines, 2023). What was seen as a significant step was the inclusion of a “Health Day” and Global Stocktake, but major gaps in climate finance and power imbalances remained (Jiang et al., 2024).

The failures and partial successes of IGOs over time help explain the rise of youth-led climate activism. Although IGOs offer access and funding their slow pace, dependence on powerful member-states, and failure to deliver on climate justice have motivated a new generation to act; specifically, more urgently, confrontationally, and increasingly outside formal diplomatic frameworks.

## **Four Selected Contemporary Youth Environmental Movements: Demands, Actions, Organizations and Echoes**

Youth environmental movements have emerged as a powerful force in the fight against climate change, often driven by eco-

anxiety and a deep frustration with governmental inaction (Manu, 2023). The movements demand quick and systemic action and criticize authorities' indifference in the face of environmental catastrophes.

Compared to more traditional 19th- and 20th-century-social movements that had been hierarchical and closely tied to political organizations, recent youth movements are non-hierarchical, decentralized, and based in grassroots structures (Tindall et al., 2022, p. 376). Their methods focus on visibility, disruption, and autonomy, employing transnational coordination and digital media. Scherman et al. (2022, pp. 751-752) state that modern protests share key characteristics, consisting of a significant presence of young people, a departure from traditional political organizations, and the broad use of digital media for political organization.

Melucci emphasizes how contemporary movements construct collective identity through direct participation and symbolic disruption (Melucci, 1980). Castells' work on networked movements explains their fast-paced transnational diffusion and digital coordination, distinguishing them from hierarchical and membership-based NGOs (Castells, 2012).

Movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Last Generation, and Just Stop Oil are valuable examples for this shift. They have gathered significant media visibility (author's research of Europresse database, 2024; see Table 2) and employ tactics such as school strikes, road blockades, and die-ins—protests in which participants lie motionless on the ground to symbolize death. These approaches, reflect a new wave of activism marked by youth leadership, non-institutional political participation, and the strategic use of social media (Scherman et al., 2022, pp. 751–752).

XR, LG, JSO, and in particular, FFF, have been crucial in innovative protest styles. As Machin (2022, p. 556) and Ollitrault (2022, pp. 27–28) observe, they have adapted these practices to confront contemporary climate inaction, using peaceful but disruptive tactics to pressure institutions and provoke public discourse. XR's definition of itself as “decentralized, global, and non-partisan”; and FFF's mobilization of millions through coordinated school strikes (Scherman et al., 2022, p. 753) exemplify their successful combination of grassroots mobilization with demands for systemic reform; revealing a disruptive engagement with authority (Pickard et al., 2022, pp. 527–528). Civil disobedience is central to their identity, which continues a tradition that

follows Thoreau, who emphasized the moral responsibility to resist injustice (Thoreau, 1849).

## **Extinction Rebellion: Civil Disobedience and Structural Critique**

XR emerged in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2018 and became one of the most prominent symbols of radical climate activism in a short span of time. It describes itself as a “global and politically non-partisan movement,” using non-violent direct action to force government action on the climate emergency. XR campaigns for three specific demands: “telling the truth about the climate crisis, acting immediately to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2025, and creating citizens’ assemblies to oversee these changes”. They frequently mention that their inspiration comes from historical civil disobedience movements and the warnings of climate scientists (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2024).

XR’s tactical repertoire is broad and confrontational in nature. The movement uses shock tactics to gain the attention of the public by blocking bridges and roads, and staging die-ins at government buildings and museums (Taylor, 2022; Van der Zee & Weston, 2023). In October 2019, the International Rebellion, a global series of climate protests organized by XR, began and involved coordinated actions in over 70 countries. In London, the protests led to more than 1,000 arrests where activists blocked roads, bridges, and public spaces. Demonstrations also took place in major cities like Paris, Berlin, New York, and Sydney (Chadwick & Beswick, 2019).

Although it was often utilizing confrontational tactics, XR also had formal engagement opportunities with IGOs. During the COP25 summit in Madrid in 2019, XR representatives met with UN officials, including the advisory team of COP President and Chilean Environment Minister Carolina Schmidt (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2019). However, right after their dialogue, XR activists partnered with the indigenous group Minga and staged demonstrations at the entrance of the conference building, calling for climate justice and stronger protection of the Amazon (Extinction Rebellion, 2019).

XR has an organizational structure that reinforces an orientation towards *conflict*. Its decentralized leadership and autonomous local groups enable it to resist hierarchical negotiation or institutional moderation. However, while decentralization serves to formalize their grassroots legitimacy, it may come as an obstacle towards developing sustained relationships with institutional actors, particularly IGOs.

## **Fridays for Future: Strategic Engagement and Institutional Legitimacy**

FFF is another climate movement that was launched in 2018 when Greta Thunberg began a solitary school strike in front of the Swedish Parliament, insisting that government should take a clear action regarding the climate crisis. The movement defines itself as a “youth-led and -organized global climate strike movement” that aims to put moral pressure upon policymakers, particularly to act in accordance with scientific consensus and limit global warming to under 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels (Fridays for Future, n.d.). FFF frames climate change as a matter of intergenerational justice and quickly turned into a global movement, becoming a pioneer for youth participation in climate politics (Shim, 2023; Svensson & Wahlström, 2021). Unlike more confrontational youth movements, FFF employs non-violent symbolic protest, primarily through globally coordinated school strikes.

Greta Thunberg’s “Our house is on fire” speech at the 2019 World Economic Forum in Davos was a critical moment in FFF’s visibility (Thunberg, 2019; Workman, 2019). Her speech at the European Parliament motivated the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker to propose increasing the European Union (EU) climate budget (Rodriguez L., 2019; Oroschakoff, 2019). Moreover, the Global Climate Strike dated 15 March 2019, drew 1.4 million students across 125 countries, receiving support from the UN Secretary-General and various political leaders (Carrington, 2019; Guterres, 2019; UN Environment Programme, 2019a). FFF’s formal dialogue reached its peak in September 2019, when the UN awarded it the “Champions of the Earth” honor award, which the activists rejected, responding that the award was unearned (UN Environment Programme, 2019b; First-Arai, 2019). During COP26 in Glasgow, the movement organized a major protest joined by the Indigenous and Global South youth (Boyle, 2021; Walsh, 2021). In their “#PeopleNotProfit” campaign in 2022, in Berlin alone, around 36,000 people participated in demonstrations (Fridays for Future, 2022; Deutsche Welle, 2022).

FFF’s critiques towards policymakers have consistently focused on the inadequacy of international responses. Despite participating in events like COP25 and COP28, these activists have criticized such forums for being performative. As Reimann (2006, p. 60) emphasizes, many NGOs experience “instrumental inclusion” wherein they are invited to participate in global governance but excluded from meaningful decision-making.

Nonetheless, FFF's cooperative stance and peaceful protest have made it as a credible actor for IGOs seeking youth voices without radical confrontation. IGOs are more welcoming towards NGOs that engage in non-conflictual advocacy, creating a *cooperative* and sometimes *co-optative* dynamic, as Gordenker and Weiss (1995, pp. 546-549) put it, since this type of youth movements poses less of a challenge to the authority and order maintained by IGOs.

However, this dynamic is not static. It should be noted that the visibility and strategic direction of FFF have shifted towards more conflict in recent months, following the period of this study. While these changes are not analyzed here, they showcase the fast-paced nature of youth activism.

### **Last Generation: Confrontation, Criminalization, and Institutional Challenge**

LG, or die Letzte Generation in its German original, began gaining attention in August 2021 after seven of its activists started an indefinite hunger strike in Berlin. Their key demand was a public dialogue with German chancellor candidates and the establishment of citizens' assemblies to address climate change. Despite its severe health risks, the protest continued for over three weeks and laid the foundation for the movement's non-violent but confrontational strategy (Barry, 2021; Letzte Generation, 2023a, 2024a).

The group demands immediate emission reductions, a shift to renewables, and science-based policy reforms. Their tactics include blocking highways, gluing themselves to artworks or roads, and disrupting sporting events, which aim to halt "business-as-usual" and provoke public accountability (Letzte Generation, 2024a-e). A key feature of LG's activism is their use of symbolic actions. In October 2022, activists glued themselves to Monet's Haystacks in Barberini Museum in Potsdam (Jones, 2022). In the following weeks, LG Italy threw pea soup at Van Gogh's The Sower painting in Rome, gluing themselves to the wall while repeating anti-fossil slogans (ITV News, 2022). Their protests deliberately avoid damaging art while simultaneously aiming to disrupt symbols of privilege and consumption, as a way of drawing attention to the hypocrisy between cultural preservation and climate inaction.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, LG held over 270 road blockades in Germany alone (Kühn, 2023), causing public frustration and media debate (France 24, 2023; Huebscher, 2023). Consequently, LG's public perception remains divided. While some supporters acknowledge the urgency of their

message, opposers continue to criticize their methods, with certain politicians and media even labeling them as “climate terrorists” (Wehrmann, 2023).

By early 2023, LG escalated its protests. In Berlin, they blocked roads near the International Criminal Court (ICC) and disrupted a Formula E race (Smith F., 2023; Reuters, 2023), using Twitter to denounce the government's constitutional violations (Letzte Generation, 2023b). In May, authorities alleged the group members of criminal fundraising and attempts to sabotage an oil pipeline; raiding 15 homes and taking down the group's website (EFE Noticias, 2023; Connolly, 2023).

International actors responded to this repression. UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric reaffirmed that the right to peaceful protest remains (United Nations, 2023a, 2023b), and Guterres later emphasized his support for non-violent demonstrations and condemning excessive police force (United Nations, 2023c). Such statements, although highly indirect to be considered an official alignment, are a reflection IGOs' support for youth. However, although the UN commentary has affirmed their right to protest, no direct institutional cooperation exists.

An important event occurred in January 2024 when LG shifted from gluing tactics to “disobedient assemblies”, which are nonviolent disruptions without property damage (Kurmayer, 2024; Symons, 2024). Around the same time, LG announced its candidacy for the European Parliament as “Shaking up Parliament – Voice of the Last Generation” (Neubert, 2024). Despite their strong branding and media attention, LG could receive only 0.3% of the vote, failing to gain any seat. (European Parliament, 2024). The underwhelming results create doubt on LG's electoral relevance and effectiveness (Rucht, 2023). Still, this transition into electoral politics shows a shift toward Johnson's (2016) *competition* category. Rather than solely resisting institutions, LG seeks to contest power from within. Its IGO interactions remain limited, however its political ambitions showcase a desire to transform and not just protest the system. This creates both opportunities and complications for LG's legitimacy and practical influence (Der Spiegel, 2023; Zauner, 2024).

## Just Stop Oil: Disruption, Criminalization, and the Politics of Visibility

JSO is another youth-driven civil resistance group, founded in the UK in 2022, demanding an immediate halt to new fossil fuel licenses. It is positioned as a nonviolent urgent response to the climate crisis, borrowing from both theory and practice of XR in civil disobedience, moral urgency, and community mobilization (Gayle, 2022; Just Stop Oil, 2024).

Similar to LG, one of JSO's most controversial actions occurred in October 2022, as activists had thrown tomato soup over Van Gogh's Sunflowers at London's National Gallery and glued themselves to the wall right after (Couto, 2022). The painting was unharmed; however, the protest was successful in gaining global media attention (Boyle, 2022).

JSO's protest methods vary from high-visibility museum actions to large-scale infrastructure disruptions. Later during the same month, two activists climbed the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge, creating traffic chaos. Both received sentences of over two years, which were the longest for peaceful climate protest in the history of the UK (ITV News, 2023; Pilgrim, 2023). Between April 2022 and early 2024, over 2,000 JSO members were arrested, with 138 of which spending time in prison (Horton, 2023). Such legal penalties showcase a trend of criminalization against youth-led disobedience.

Despite intensified measures like the UK's Public Order Act (2023), JSO continues employing methods of direct action. Their protests have disrupted sporting events (Sutcliffe, 2023; BBC, 2023), oil terminals (Webster & Smyth, 2022), and, more recently, luxury spaces associated with climate privilege. In June 2024, activists sprayed orange paint on private jets at Stansted Airport, criticizing carbon inequality and calling for a global fossil fuel treaty (Lee, 2024; Meighan, 2024).

In November 2023, after several brutal penalties of JSO demonstrators by the UK authorities, Ian Fry and Michel Forst, former UN special rapporteurs, drew attention to the challenges faced by environmental defenders. These rapporteurs are voluntary, independent human rights experts elected to report and advise upon human rights to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d.). In his publications, Ian Fry expressed concern about the severity of sentences handed to JSO protesters for peaceful protests, citing potential violations of international law as well as the risk of silencing environmental issues (Gayle, 2023). Similarly, Michel Forst criticized the UK

environmental protest crack-down, in reference to “draconian” new laws, excessive restrictions on courtroom evidence, and civil injunctions that stamp on fundamental freedoms (Forst, 2024).

On many occasions, JSO quotes and shares speeches and press statements about climate action by global leaders and representatives of the UN. This might show JSO’s preference for collaborations with world leaders rather than their initial impression of aiming for only destruction. Still, as far as this study’s findings reached, there were no formal meetings with or invitations from any intergovernmental bodies to JSO. Additionally, even though they face some of the harshest criminalization for peaceful protest in UK history, none of these activists are mentioned in any official setting by political leaders. This lack of engagement presumably is caused by the movement’s relatively recent emergence, radical image, and rejection of conventional advocacy approaches.

JSO’s decentralized, bloc-based structure places emphasis on autonomy and quick mobilization over institutional negotiation (Lynskey, 2022). Again, this allows flexibility and grassroots legitimacy but limits opportunities for structured engagement with IGOs.

As legitimacy arguments around climate action continue to grow, JSO exemplifies both the power and limits of radical visibility. It forces climate justice into public discourse but struggles to pierce through institutional governance structures. Unless IGOs evolve to recognize the role of confrontational actors, JSO and groups alike may remain as powerful actors but sole outsiders. They may be respected by some and criminalized by others, but they can always push the boundaries of legitimate activism.

## Overview of the Cases

Measuring the success of these movements is complex. While none of them have single-handedly reversed climate change, they have undeniably gained massive public attention and media coverage. XR’s tactics have created debates about the necessity of civil disobedience in the fight against climate change. FFF has arguably had the most significant impact on policy discussions. It inspires similar movements worldwide with school strikes and influences climate agendas. LG and JSO, though newer groups, have successfully disrupted fossil fuel operations and highlighted public dependence on these resources (Koc, 2023).

These groups have all forced a reevaluation of priorities and ignited a sense of urgency in demanding action from governments and corporations. The diversity in their approaches shows the multifaceted nature of the climate movement. The following table provides a comparative overview of the movements discussed above. It highlights their foundational details, primary demands, missions, areas of operation, tactics, and notable events. The diverse strategies and priorities of these movements offer insights into their unique contributions to global climate activism.

Name	Extinction Rebellion (XR)	Fridays for Future (FFF)	Last Generation (LG)	Just Stop Oil (JSO)
<b>Foundation</b>	2018, UK	2018, Sweden	2021, Germany	2022, UK
<b>Primary Demands</b>	Government to declare a climate and ecological emergency, and act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025.	Immediate action to address climate change, following the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C.	Urgent measures to combat climate change, adherence to the Paris Agreement and achieve carbon neutrality by 2030.	End to all new fossil fuel licenses and funding, transition to renewable energy, and reduce carbon emissions.
<b>Mission</b>	Push for climate emergency declarations; citizens' assemblies for climate justice.	Urgent climate action for climate justice.	Immediate action on climate change, focus on governmental accountability.	End new fossil fuel projects, transition to renewable energy.
<b>Area of Operation</b>	Global	Global	Local branches operating under one big network	Local branches operating under one big network

<b>Tactics</b>	Non-violent civil disobedience, mass disruptions, occupying public spaces.	School strikes every Friday; global climate strikes.	Civil disobedience, road blockades, targeted actions on energy infrastructure, running for EU Parliament.	Direct action, public disruption, strong media engagement.
<b>Major Events</b>	<b>April 2019 London Occupation</b> : Led to the Parliament of the UK to declare a climate emergency.	<b>March 2019, Global Climate Strike</b> : 1.4 million participants across 125 countries.	<b>Aug 2021, Hunger Strikes</b> : Hunger strike in Berlin, demanding a meeting with German political leaders.	<b>October 2022, Art Gallery Protests</b> : High-profile art protests (i.e., van Gogh's "Sunflowers").
	<b>April 2023, "The Big One"</b> : Mobilized over 60,000 participants in a family-friendly protest.	<b>Sep 2022-2024, Earth Day Protests</b> : Ongoing annual strikes for climate justice.	<b>Jan 2024, Shift in Tactics</b> : Shifted tactics from road blockades to targeting fossil fuel infrastructure.	<b>Aug 2024, Protest at Stansted</b> : Targeted protest at Stansted Airport, criticizing luxury carbon footprints.

**Table 4:** Descriptive Information Regarding XR, FFF, LG, JSO.

An important approach to show the uniqueness in their relations with IGOs is the participation of these youth movements in COP summits. FFF has established a visible presence in these spaces, where it delivered speeches and addressed global leaders, while other groups like XR, LG, and JSO have limited formal participation. Table 5 provides an overview of the involvement of these movements in COP summits, showing their level of participation, key interactions, and overall impact. This comparison is crucial in highlighting the varying degrees to which youth movements gain access to these platforms.

	<b>Extinction Rebellion</b>	<b>Fridays for Future</b>	<b>Last Generation</b>	<b>Just Stop Oil</b>
<b>COP25 (2019)</b>	Not a participant	Participated	Not formed yet	Not formed yet
<b>COP26 (2021)</b>	Not a participant	Participated	Not a participant	Not formed yet
<b>COP27 (2022)</b>	Participated	Participated	Not a participant	Not a participant
<b>COP28 (2023)</b>	Participated	Participated	Not a participant	Not a participant

**Table 5:** Youth Movements' Participation in COP Summit (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2019; 2021a-b; 2022; 2023).

## Discussion of Findings

These selected cases illustrate the fluidity of Johnson's 4Cs. Throughout the years, FFF moved from cooperation to co-optation. FFF leaders have been invited to multiple events where they delivered powerful speeches. These invitations indicate that IGOs demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with the youth in climate discussions. However, despite these engagements, FFF finds that the outcomes do not meet its demands for urgent climate action.

Consequently, FFF's involvement in these events can be seen as a form of co-optation. By giving the movement a platform, IGOs acknowledge FFF's influence and attempt to integrate their perspectives into the climate dialogue. However, this recognition comes with limitations, as it might aim to silence FFF's more radical calls. While FFF initially engaged cooperatively with IGOs, their co-optation efforts by these organizations have not neutralized their activism. In fact, FFF in the most recent months actively protests and criticizes both governments and IGOs. In this sense, FFF shows a shift towards conflict with IGOs, which should be analyzed in further studies.

XR's relationship with IGOs is characterized by conflict. XR's strategy of civil disobedience and direct action aims to challenge the status quo. Examples of cooperative relations exist in XR-IGO dynamics, such as meetings with high-level IGO officials and indirect support from figures like António Guterres. However, these interactions have not significantly altered XR's radical approach. The movement maintains its disruptive tactics and radical demands, leading to frequent detentions and legal challenges. XR's actions and criticisms of IGO policies create a conflictual dynamic.

Similarly, JSO operates within a conflictual dynamic. Their tactics position JSO against both governmental and IGO policies that continue to support or tolerate fossil fuel projects. While JSO has received indirect recognition from special rapporteurs, this support does not extend to formal cooperation or co-optation. The movement's focus on aggressive direct action and the frequent detainment of its members showcases the clashing nature of its relationship with IGOs.

Lastly, LG's relationship with IGOs provides a different outlet that shows conflict and emerging elements of competition. LG's disobedience tactics emphasize their confrontational approach, placing them in direct opposition to established policies supported by IGOs. However, LG's attempt to enter the European Parliament is a direct shift towards formal political engagement, as political participation can be seen as a form of competition, where the movement seeks to embed its ideals within institutional frameworks while competing with the current political bodies.

These patterns show that youth movements rarely fit neatly into one category; and their relations with IGOs shift across contexts and over time (see Table 6).

Name	Extinction Rebellion (XR)	Fridays for Future (FFF)	Last Generation (LG)	Just Stop Oil (JSO)
<b>Alignment with 4Cs Taxonomy</b>	Conflict	Cooperation/ Co-optation/ Conflict <i>(recently)</i>	Conflict/ Competition	Conflict
<b>Approach</b>	Limited formal IGO engagement.	Frequent formal engagement.	Minimal IGO engagement; focuses on EU politics.	No formal IGO interaction.
<b>Key Interaction</b>	Meeting with UN officials during COP25.	Thunberg's speeches at WEF and European Parliament.	EU Parliament election campaign, "Shake up Parliament."	No formal IGO interaction.

<b>Challenge</b>	High criminalization, divisive public opinion.	Tension with IGOs over stronger demands.	Criminalization in Germany, polarized public perception.	Legal restrictions and societal pushback.
<b>Impact</b>	Pushed climate conversation in the UK.	Raised climate urgency and influenced IGO agendas.	Mixed support from German political factions.	Sparked debate on environmental radicalism.

**Table 6:** Youth Movements-IGO Relations and Their Alignment with the 4Cs Taxonomy

At the same time, the UN seems to be recognizing the pivotal role of youth in climate action. Most recently, the UN has actively sought to collaborate with youth-led organizations. Initiatives such as the collaboration with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the establishment of the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change are some of the examples for the UN's effort to integrate youth perspectives into global climate governance structures (United Nations, 2023d, 2023e). The collaborative efforts of IGOs with young people supposedly aim to empower them, providing them with the platform and resources to drive change and represent a recognition of the transformative potential of youth-led activism. While these initiatives appear to represent progress toward incorporating youth perspectives into climate action, the UN's efforts to establish a separate and controlled youth organization, instead of engaging directly with the already existing grassroots movements, remains open to debate regarding its authenticity for inclusivity and its reluctance to engage with bottom-up initiatives.

Why some groups gain more recognition from international bodies poses another area of discussion. Arguably, FFF steps out as the only youth movement among the respective groups, whose relationship with the UN and the EU has reached a certain degree of cooperation. As handled in the first section of this research, there are some theories on why some NGOs tend to be at the forefront of the attention of IGOs. One of the possible reasons that early-FFF drew more attention from IGOs is its non-disruptive method of protest, which stands in contrast to the more confrontational and disruptive strategies employed by movements like XR, LG, and JSO. IGOs seem to be more welcoming towards NGOs that engage in non-conflictual

advocacy, and that are less likely to be perceived as a direct threat to public order and safety, as Gordenker and Weiss (1995) argued. Confrontational tactics can make these groups less attractive partners for IGOs, which seek to maintain stability and order in their operations.

Legitimacy and international media attention are also crucial factors in determining the influence and favorability of youth movements by IGOs. While Vabulas (2013) emphasizes the importance of the legitimacy and “friendliness” of the NGOs in their relations with the IGOs, Reimann (2006) underlines the role of media attention in their degree of influence, noting that movements with high media attention and with a variety of other resources, have bigger platforms in the international political arena. FFF’s high visibility and its non-radical image are the factors making it to be more likely to increase its perceived legitimacy. In contrast, another mass movement which is XR, while also highly visible, is often perceived as more radical and extreme. This perception can undermine its legitimacy in the eyes of IGOs and make it a less favorable partner.

## Conclusion

Youth environmental movements’ diverse strategies and demands challenge IGOs to reassess priorities, procedures, and inclusivity. This study has shown how four of those movements’ (XR, FFF, LG and JSO) relationships with IGOs fall across a spectrum captured by Johnson’s 4Cs framework. Findings reveal that FFF operates between cooperation, co-optation, and conflict, as formal invitations to participate in IGO processes coexist with frustration over insufficient climate action. XR and JSO represent movements in conflict with institutional structures, emphasizing disruption as a political tool. LG occupies a unique position, transitioning from conflict to competition through formal political participation.

These dynamics indicate to a broader trend in climate governance. Here, bureaucratic slowness, elite-driven negotiations, and exclusion of dissenting voices have driven youth movements to seek new ways. Their ability to mobilize global publics and hold institutions accountable is reshaping climate diplomacy. Yet challenges remain. IGOs continue to resist engaging with more confrontational actors, reinforcing the perceptions around institutional inertia. If youth voices are to be meaningfully included, IGOs must lower barriers, expand access, and legitimize diverse forms of participation. This

includes creating institutional mechanisms that welcome both cooperative and disruptive activism.

The implications are that the legitimacy in climate governance now depends on how inclusive and responsive institutions are to grassroots demands. Youth movements have pushed climate to the top of political agendas. Whether IGOs can meet that urgency will define the future of global environmental politics.

Given the fast-paced progression of youth environmental movements, including developments that occurred after the finalization of this research, further observation will be essential. These shifts may consequently illuminate the changing dynamics between grassroots activism and institutional climate governance. Future research should examine youth movements beyond the Global North, evaluate the long-term effects of protest on policy, and study hybrid forms of activism that blend grassroots energy with institutional access. Ultimately, empowering youth participation is not a symbolic gesture, it is a democratic necessity in confronting the climate crisis.

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