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Prioritising communities: barriers to climate activism and political imagination among minoritised youth groups

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ABSTRACT

Minoritised youth voices are often underrepresented in climate action research. Despite the increasing interest in youth climate activism, there is still an overall lack of attention to the perspectives of young people struggling with discrimination, poverty, and other social injustices. In this article, we focus on a diverse group of minoritised youth in Portugal to explore their experiences of climate activism, perceived agency, and political imaginaries of the future. We conducted a qualitative study involving seven focus groups with 55 participants, including young people with a migrant background and/or living in underserved communities in Portugal. Based on a Reflexive Thematic Analysis, we generated three main themes that illustrate participants' ways of engaging with climate change issues, the barriers that constrain their engagement with climate activism and the challenges in the political imagination of the future. Our findings suggest that minoritised youth would like to have a voice in political debates about climate change and that more inclusive dialogues about climate futures could help bridge existing territorial and social divides.

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Introduction

Recent literature on youth-led movements, such as the 'School Strike for Climate (SSC)' and 'End of Fossil Occupy!', has given visibility to youth climate activism (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024; Pickard 2022). Since the first SSC back in 2018, there has been a significant increase in youth climate activism research (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). Yet, until now, very few studies have focused on the voices and experiences of minoritised youth in climate activism (e.g. Barnes 2021; Walker 2020; Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). It has been suggested that young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are concerned with global and local environmental issues (e.g. Walker 2020; Wilson and

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Snell 2010), although activism and grassroots campaigns led by these communities are barely represented in mainstream media or in research (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022).

Against this background, this article focuses on the experiences of minoritised youth, which are essential to fully comprehend the dynamics and processes involved in youth climate activism (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024; Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). We use the term 'minoritised youth' to acknowledge the active and unequal processes that are involved in the allocation of power and resources (Selvarajah et al. 2020) and to foreground the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression often faced by different youth groups (Savage et al. 2021). These inequalities are often related to social factors such as class, migratory status, race, and gender and are being amplified in the face of climate change (e.g. Mikulewicz et al. 2023). Thus, taking an intersectional climate justice approach can help to examine the agency of people often portrayed as 'vulnerable' to climate change impacts and the forces of global capitalism (Mikulewicz et al. 2023). Specifically, we ask: How do young people from minoritised groups engage with climate change? How do they perceive their agency in shaping climate futures? What barriers do they face when engaging with climate change and political imagination? Supported by literature on youth climate activism (Bowman 2019; 2020; Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Pickard, Bowman, and Arya 2022; Walker 2020), political imagination and climate futures (Anderson, Aushana, and Collins 2022; Bowman 2019; Cattell 2021; Finnegan 2021; Machin 2022), we discuss the findings of a qualitative study using focus group discussions to explore minoritised youth's experiences, agency, views of the future and forms of climate activism. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of minoritised youth in relation to climate activism and of the ways in which youth perceived agency shapes their climate activism and imaginations of the future.

Youth climate activism, agency and political imaginaries

Youth are among the groups most affected by climate change (e.g. Spannring and Hawke 2022; Sanson and Bellemo 2021), already suffering multiple political, social, environmental, and economic disparities due to climate change, as well as several impacts on their well-being and climate anxiety (Ojala 2005; Wilson and Snell 2010). As a strong case of intergenerational injustice (Barford et al. 2021), climate change also affects different youth groups differently. Specifically, it is well established in the literature that youth from minoritised groups and communities in countries in the so-called 'Global North' and youth in the 'Global South' are being particularly affected by climate change (e.g. Newnham, Titov, and McEvoy 2020; Sanson and Bellemo 2021). Structural inequality and power dynamics have also been observed to have an impact on the way certain activist actions and movements are more visible than others in mainstream media and in research (Barnes 2021; Bowman 2020). Existing research often ignores the diversity and political potential of young people's actions, particularly of those from minoritised groups (Fernandes-Jesus and Malafaia 2014; Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Spannring and Hawke 2022). We argue that to understand how minoritised youth engage with climate change, research needs to pay more attention to their everyday actions (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Walker 2017) and interpersonal experiences (Hayward 2012; Pickard, Bowman, and Arya 2020). Additionally, identity factors such as

race, gender, and social class cannot be overlooked (Börner, Kraftl, and Giatti 2021; Bowman 2019; Collins 2021; Navne and Skovdal 2021; Wood 2020). Thus, our research acknowledges the importance of looking at climate-related issues from an intersectional climate justice approach (e.g. Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Mikulewicz et al. 2023; Patterson et al. 2018). An intersectional climate justice approach implies recognising the disproportionate and intersecting impacts of climate change and climate policies on historically marginalised groups and communities (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Sultana 2010). In this study, we will look at how age, migrant background, and living in underserved communities may shape how youth engage with climate change. For example, based on previous research with young immigrants and their participation experiences (e.g. Fernandes-Jesus, Ribeiro, and Malafaia 2012; Ribeiro et al. 2014a), we expect that young people with an immigrant background will encounter several possibilities and constraints when engaging in climate action. On the one hand, drawing from their lived experience in more than one country, they may be more aware of climate injustices and can offer important contributions to climate politics based on their lived experiences. On the other hand, they may face structural obstacles (e.g. lack of access to opportunities and resources to participate, experiences of discrimination, and existing prejudice and bias towards immigrants) that constrain their political agency in hosting countries (Fernandes-Jesus, Ribeiro, and Malafaia 2012; Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2014; Ribeiro et al. 2014a, 2014b). Such structural barriers may lead to a preference for forms of engagement beyond the conventional definitions of the 'political', using their everyday life practices (Skelton 2010; Punch and Tisdall 2012). Within forms of action which typically go unnoticed, such as local initiatives of environmental care (Kallio and Häkli 2011, 2013; Kallio, Häkli, and Bäcklund 2015; 2020; Skelton 2010), young people can be concerned about ecological degradation, and be critical of the inaction of political leaders (Walker 2020). In diverse interactions with communities, family, friends, and even within themselves, emotionally and psychologically (Trott 2021), they can demonstrate care and concern for the environment through intentional practices in both private and public spaces (Walker 2020). These everyday practices (e.g. cleaning up common spaces in neighbourhoods or schools) can have a transformative potential for youth, and need to be understood within the social complexities and ambiguities that shape young people's lives (Bowman 2019; Wood 2020). Previous research has suggested that climate activism is influenced by structural and relational dimensions in young people's lives, including social dynamics and power relations (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024; Mitchell and Elwood 2012). In this way, it is not merely a reflection of an individual's engagement in social interactions, but also linked to the political world. To reproduce and reframe the social and political worlds, individuals' actions are conditioned by several barriers and structural binds (Barnes 2021; Holloway, Holt, and Mills 2019). Youth can actively mobilise their agency to address the structural constraints and negotiate their positions, actions, and desires (Barnes 2021). Therefore, understanding youth's agency (i.e. simply put, their capacity to act) (Sanchini, Sala, and Pongiglione 2019) requires looking at their actions as 'informed by the past, but also oriented toward the future, as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963). Sitas et al.'s study (2022) with youth living in underserved communities showed that working with future imagination can help to identify diverse pathways for social change while creating safe spaces for co-learning and connection. Subjective ideas about what could happen in

the future and how we can make it happen (Cattell 2021) are influenced by cultural and material contexts and may help to preserve well-being in times of rapid and unpredictable global change (Shaw et al. 2009; Wiek, Binder, and Scholz 2006). By focusing on political imagination, we seek to explore how young people envision alternative political futures and conceive their agency in shaping such futures. Political imagination refers to those 'imaginings of political order, of how power works and should work' (Jaffe 2018, 1099). As a concept, it highlights not only the alternative futures that can be found to address climate change and other societal challenges but also the ways by which such solutions can be developed and our roles in shaping the futures (Duncombe and Harrebye 2021). Importantly, political imagination is often considered a driver of action and a key factor in societal transformation (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012; Machin 2022). However, several psychological and structural barriers, such as current political and economic structures and existing societal norms and values, tend to constrain our imagination (Herbert 2021; Solnit 2012). As research on political imagination among marginalised groups and communities is particularly scarce, in this study we will focus on minoritised youth in the Portuguese context to explore views and perceived barriers in envisioning political alternatives and engaging with climate change. While a contested term, political imaginaries refer to those 'dynamic constructions of political reality that enable practices, orientate expectations, inform decisions and determine what is politically legitimate, feasible, and valuable – and what is not' (Machin 2022, 2). Political imaginaries are often limited by hegemonic discourses (including those found in media and popular culture) that may constrain youth's ability to imagine and build political alternatives (Herbert 2021).

Minoritised youth and climate activism in the Portuguese context

While the perspectives of minoritised young people are still considered a recent concern in Portugal (Raposo 2022; Raposo et al. 2019), how they engage with social and political issues has been the focus of some studies in the last decade (e.g. Fernandes-Jesus, Ribeiro, and Malafaia 2012; Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2014; Ribeiro et al. 2012; Ribeiro et al. 2014a). More recently, scholars have started to look at young people's views and experiences of activism with climate-related issues (e.g. Diógenes-Lima et al. 2023; Malafaia and Meriluoto 2024; Kowasch et al. 2021). However, following the international trend (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022), to our knowledge, none have focused on the experiences of minoritised youth. Our study addresses this gap by focusing on two groups of minoritised youth: young migrants from Brazil and Angola living in Portugal, and young people living in underserved peripheral neighbourhoods of Lisbon and Porto. Migration wise, Portugal has always been oscillating between being a 'sender' and a receiving country (Augusto et al. 2022). Diasporic communities from Portuguese-speaking countries, such as Angola, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Brazil, were, for many years, the majority of migrants settling in, which can be explained by the country's colonial history (Ribeiro et al. 2012). Research with young descendants of migrants from Angola and Brazil suggests that their political participation has often been curbed by a lack of opportunities to engage with civic and political issues (Fernandes-Jesus, Ribeiro, and Malafaia 2012; Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2014; Ribeiro et al. 2012; Ribeiro et al. 2014a). Furthermore, young people with a migrant background identify several barriers to social

inclusion, such as racism or lack of access to information and education about citizenship and rights (Ribeiro et al. 2012). These and other obstacles are likely to shape their participation in social and political issues (Fernandes-Jesus, Ribeiro, and Malafaia 2012), including on climate-related issues.

As to the underserved communities included in the study, these were neighbourhoods historically affected by systemic discrimination over the last decades, including precarious housing conditions, poor standard public services (e.g. schools, roads, transport), and high levels of unemployment. These contexts have often been related to public discourse (e.g. from mainstream Portuguese media and political institutions) that criminalise and associate those who live in underserved neighbourhoods with violence (Raposo et al. 2019). One of our community partners in this research, Choices Programme (Programa Escolhas), was created by the Portuguese Government in 2001 under media narratives of 'social alarm' and instigated by damaging portrayals of suburban youth (Raposo 2022). The program has funded thousands of community-based social inclusion projects, targeting Roma youth, migrant communities and other minoritised groups. In Portugal, Roma youth seems to be particularly impacted by multiple barriers to their participation, including an added vulnerability to marginalisation and exclusion (Ie and Ursin 2022).

Concerning youth climate activism in Portugal, *SSC* has developed recently in multiple locations with a concentration in the urban areas of Lisbon and Porto (Kowasch et al. 2021; Carvalho et al. 2022). Social justice concerns are present in the discourses of the Portuguese climate activist movements (Kowasch et al. 2021; Malafaia, 2022). Their discourses also call for a whole society approach to the climate struggle (Rebelo et al. 2023), yet they do not specifically address the social inequalities that disproportionately affect minoritised youth groups – such as immigrants, Roma people, and Black and racialised youth. It is also important to understand how minoritised youth, at their end, perceive and relate to climate activism, and whether they acknowledge the discourses and actions proposed by youth climate movements.

Methodology

As part of a large interdisciplinary research project, we developed a qualitative study aiming at exploring young people's perspectives on climate change, their perceived political agency and modes of engagement with this issue. Between October 2022 and April 2023, we conducted 22 Focus Group Discussions (hereafter FGDs) with a diverse group of 155 young people, including climate activist and non-climate activist youth, as well as young people from a minoritised youth background. The focus groups were conducted between October 2022 and April 2023. For this article, we focused on the FGDS conducted with young people from minoritised youth groups (aged 15–34) to highlight their views, experiences and concerns. This involves a total of seven FGDs, with 55 participants (aged 15–34), with migrant youth from Angola and Brazil and young people living in underserved neighbourhoods of Lisbon and Porto (see Table 1).

As the main inclusion criteria, participants had to be young people between 15 and 35 years old. Reflecting on the intersectional barriers disproportionately affecting underserved neighbourhoods and minoritised communities (Salleh 2017), we intentionally reached out to young people in underserved neighbourhoods and communities in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto. To recruit participants, we established contact

Table 1. FGDs with minoritised youth.

No.	Participants	Background	Age	Gender			Region
				M	F	Other	
FGD1	8	Underserved neighbourhood/Choices Program	15–29	3	5		Lisbon
FGD2	9	Highschool students from underserved communities	17–19	2	7		Porto
FGD3	10	Underserved neighbourhood/Choices Program	15–18	6	4		Porto
FGD10	10	Young migrants from Angola	18–30	7	3		Porto
FGD11	5	Young migrant women from Brazil	22–34		5		Porto
FGD12	8	Underserved neighbourhood/Choices Program	15–20	4	4		Porto
FGD17	5	Highschool students from underserved communities	17		5		Porto
Total	55			22	33		

with grassroots and local organisations with experience working in underserved communities (e.g. Programa Escolhas) and/or with minoritised youth groups (e.g. Association of Angolan Students; Association of Brazilian Students). During our contact with these organisations, we asked for their advice on mobilising potential participants, recruiting participants, determining the best time to schedule the FGDs, and finding suitable locations for running the focus groups. An initial meeting was set up with each potential group to establish rapport with the participants and provide a space to clarify any doubts.

The focus groups were conducted in Portuguese and co-facilitated by two members of the research team. Following previous recommendations (e.g. Kitzinger 1994), the facilitator was responsible for leading the discussion while the co-facilitator focused on observing nonverbal cues and group interactions. Previous research combining photo elicitation and focus groups (e.g. Walstra 2020) found that using images helped establish rapport among participants and contribute to the collective construction of meaning. A semi-structured guide, including a photo-elicitation task, was used. Participants could either bring one photo/image with them or, in case they forgot, the moderators would provide a preselection to choose from. With this, we were able to collect each participant's personal views on climate change before asking questions. This was followed by a set of questions focused on participants' views on actions and measures to tackle climate change (e.g. *How would you describe your involvement with this issue*?). The second part of the discussion aimed at eliciting participants' imagination with questions focused on alternative futures (e.g. *Try to imagine a future where it has been possible to deal with climate change in a better way. What does it look like?).* All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analytical procedure

Transcripts were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), an analytical approach that seeks to identify patterns of shared meaning across the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021). RTA recognises that the researchers have an active role in knowledge production and encourages engagement with reflexivity and researchers' subjectivity (Braun and Clarke 2019; 2021; Byrne 2022). We followed Braun and Clarke's proposed phases (2006, 2019, 2021) to guide our analysis. We approached the analysis as an iterative process involving several cycles of coding, naming, renaming and defining themes.

The first author led the analytical process and was also one of the facilitators in all the seven FGDs considered in this analysis. She started by reading all the focus group transcripts and making initial familiarisation notes. The second phase involved coding all

the data, while the third involved generating initial themes. She coded the dataset manually using MAXQDA software and then developed initial themes. Codes and initial themes were mostly developed inductively, which means that a bottom-up and data-driven approach was followed (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021). All phases of the analysis were discussed with the last author via regular meetings to explore the challenges faced during the analytical procedure, jointly reflect on our assumptions and bias about the data and share initial impressions on shared meanings across participants and FGDs. Once a set of initial themes was developed, the analysis was discussed with all co-authors involved in this study and then presented to a youth advisory committee, which provided complementary feedback based on their experiences. Based on these discussions, the first author returned to the analysis and revised and redefined the initial themes. Following a bottom-up and inductive approach throughout the analysis helped us to engage deeply with the views and perspectives of our participants and facilitated a collaborative, thoughtful and reflexive analytical process.

Analysis

The analysis generated three main interrelated themes related to our research questions**.** The first theme, 'First, we have to care about people: prioritising communal care' illustrates that, although participants do worry about environmental issues, they often prioritise social justice and communal care as their focus of action, without making a connection between different struggles. The second theme, 'I think everything is a big barrier: feeling disempowered,' captures perceived obstacles to change, including the inaction of conventional politics, the lack of access to education on climate, and adultism. The third theme, 'We lack a space to dream: the challenge of imagining the future', illustrates how participants envision the future, highlighting perceived barriers to political imagination.

'First, we have to care about people': prioritising communal care

Initially, the youngest participants (15–18 years) demonstrated some resistance to discussing issues related to climate change. According to them, although not entirely unfamiliar, the topic was almost absent from their daily conversations. However, during the focus groups, several local environmental concerns and forms of action were identified. Worries about the accumulation of garbage in their neighbourhoods, in their schools, and on the nearby beaches and woods were prevalent among the groups. Many participants listed individual actions they were taking, either at home or at school, to protect the environment. These included recycling habits, minimising the use of plastic bags, saving energy, and reducing the consumption of unnecessary items (e.g. new phones). There was some sense of guilt among participants associated with the perception that young people may, at times and unknowingly, be doing 'more harm than good' to the environment (e.g. Elvira and Cidália, FGD1). Older participants (particularly university students and those older than 18 years) added other concerns, such as excessive consumerism and difficulties in 'avoiding fast fashion' (Arminda, FGD10). Green mobility choices were also mentioned, with some participants discussing the importance of using a bike instead of taking the bus (e.g. Elvira, FGD1). These discourses raised the question among some participants of who could afford to become an 'environmentally conscientious citizen', as some of the

'demands' to be environment-friendly require access to products and services that are less available to underserved communities. Nevertheless, some participants, particularly those from underserved communities, felt responsible for contributing and even 'policing' their younger peers on pro-environmental behaviours, as shown by Joana and Natália in the following extract:

> **Facilitator:** So, to what extent does this photo [photograph of a group of young people cleaning their common space in a community-based project] relates to the way you deal with climate change?
> **Joana:** The fact that I don't throw garbage on the floor, the fact that I tell them [looking at the younger participants] not to throw garbage on the floor, the fact that I separate the garbage …
> **Natália:** We force them to pick up the garbage from the floor … .
> **Joana:** … we force them to pick up the garbage from the floor …
> **Facilitator**: And when you say 'they', who are 'they'?
> **Joana:** Them! Them! [pointing to the younger peers in the group and in the photograph].
>
> (FGD3, Joana, 17 and Natália,16)

Other participants mentioned that they are taking more collective forms of action involving working together to improve their neighbourhoods or schools, such as painting, cleaning the woods, cleaning up local beaches, or repairing damaged walls and buildings. They referred to these community-based forms of action as opportunities to learn and sensitise their local communities about the need to protect the environment, 'raising [their] conscientiousness' (Natália, FGD3). Such discussions were particularly common among high school students from underserved communities.

Older participants with a migrant background talked more extensively about the effects of global inequalities and how those relate to climate change. Taking into consideration the climate injustices observed in their own countries (e.g. the actions of multinational corporations in Brazil, Angola and the Congo), their concerns extended from land degradation to exploitation of labour, and the global repercussions of natural resources' extractivism:

> **Aníbal:** I come from the east of Angola (…) which is heavily exploited for wood, we have (…) 80% of the soil with diamonds (…) we have companies (…) that do the extraction. What happens? Taking what my colleague said before, about holding people who do these things accountable … It's one thing for us to extract and that's okay, if it's to generate revenue, to transform, that is making the country develop (…) but my province and the neighbouring region suffer too much from the ravines. That is, we have open-air exploration, with bombs and explosions and all that, so you can get to the diamonds. (…) Unfortunately, there are people in outlying areas who have houses near or on the edge of the ravines [and suffer the impact] (…) and then we have Congo, which exploits cobalt … it's the children who extract it with buckets. And if we look at the amount of people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with a smartphone, or with an iPhone, it does not match this exploitation and risk exposure (…)
> **Leopoldo:** The Congo issue is a complex one; it's not just a question of human exploitation, it's a geopolitical issue, where the rulers themselves feed it. Congo is destined to be in the coming years, a centre of war. Why? Because the United States, the European Union, in particular, and also other partners, need cobalt (…) so often, it's not just having very good ideas and wanting to raise awareness, but it's about the bigger

structures …

(FGD10, Aníbal, 25, Leopoldo, 30)

Consistent with previous studies focusing on minoritised youth (e.g. Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2014; Walker 2020), our analysis suggests that many young people are concerned, interested and care about environmental and other issues. While young migrants with lived experience in the Global South discussed the consequences of climate change at the global level, such was less explored among those participants who were born in Portugal. Many participants showed that they are responding to their concerns through their everyday actions in their communities. They are simultaneously trying to be 'agents of change', trying to raise pro-environmental awareness among their communities, and making suggestions on how they and others can respond to the challenges (Wilson and Snell 2010).

Notwithstanding, participants brought up a diverse array of concerns and actions, showing their own ways of engaging with politics (Banaji 2008; Henn, Weinstein, and Wring 2002). Some were involved in campaigns against bullying, while others were standing up against racism and discrimination. They engaged with these and other social challenges by organising debates, conferences, exhibitions, and performances. Other participants shared ideas on addressing poverty and the increased cost of living, which they believed to be disproportionately affecting marginalised communities in Portugal. Although, as we have seen, environmental concerns were present in minoritised youth's everyday lives and discourses, they claim that 'first, we have to care about people' (Guilherme, FGD12). In this excerpt, Guilherme expands on this idea, while Paula shows her pessimism over the possibilities of changing the root of the problem:

Co-facilitator: Guilherme, […] you talked about children who starve to death? […] What does this mean? Does it mean that there are causes that are more important than others? (…)
Guilherme: (…) first, we have to care about people, because without people we wouldn't be fighting climate change. So first dealing with people, and then dealing with climate change … By not treating people first, climate change would get worse (…)
Co-facilitator: Do you agree?
Paula: I agree, but I don't know if it's possible to have a world where no one goes hungry. Sincerely … Because there are people with a lot of money who could end hunger in the world, and why doesn't it end?

(FGD12, Guilherme, 19; Paula, 17)

In this interaction, we can see how Guilherme and Paula interpret political priorities while remaining sceptical of the possibility of changing 'the world'. Older participants expanded on this idea, arguing that although climate change is seen as a problem, it is not necessarily their political priority. Some young migrants reflected on the need to look at climate actions in a more holistic way, embracing various political struggles and moving beyond a Eurocentric lens:

Taís: I think it relates a lot with … who can exist? (…) I think that deep down, the struggles, like anti-oppression, in general, we separate it because there are markers that separate them, but we are talking about … who can survive and exist in this planet? Right? Which are the lives and bodies that can exist? So, I think the whole

> point is defending humanity as a whole, its possibility of existing, an umbrella of all struggles …
> **Facilitator:** Right, an intersectional perspective?
> **Taís:** Exactly, it is a very intersectional struggle, and mainly because within our way of thinking, we seek, in the epistemologies of the South, to look at this issue, the importance of us looking at ancestral, indigenous knowledges, black authors … When we shift our gaze a little from the Eurocentric lens and so on, these issues were already there. It's not just now, just because they started calling it the climate justice movement.
>
> (FGD11, Taís, 29)

Taís, a young immigrant woman from Brazil, retained the word intersectionality after the facilitator proposed it, showing her familiarity with the concept. We observed that this term was only used by older participants who identified as activists (Taís identified herself as a feminist activist) but was uncommon among younger and non-activist participants. Her point eloquently illustrates what some participants hinted at in other groups: that all social struggles should be acknowledged when considering climate activism. However, as we have seen above, most of our participants did not make a clear connection between climate activism and other social struggles.

'I think everything is a big barrier … ': feeling disempowered

Despite recognising global inequalities (i.e. migrant youth) and the need to put people first (i.e. youth from underserved communities), participants in our study did not see themselves as holding enough power to influence political decisions or transform reality. Likewise, most participants generally perceived a lack of 'enough information' about climate change. Discussions on this matter revolved around criticism of the educational system for not including opportunities to debate and act on climate change. Participants called for more intentional climate education, which could make a significant difference in their ability to understand the problem and take informed action. This is consistent with recent studies that found a disconnection between climate change education and action (McGimpsey, Rousell, and Howard 2023) and call for reframing the relation between the educational structures and young people in a way that recognises them as political citizens.

Another barrier to engaging with climate action was a perception of a lack of accountability in conventional politics. As previously found in the literature (e.g., Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2014; Malafaia et al. 2018; Pontes, Henn, and Griffiths 2018), several young people participating in our study shared negative views about politicians and political parties. Participants from Brazil and Angola went further, connecting institutional politics to global capitalism, conveying that, in their view, political change was difficult, if not impossible (e.g. Taís, FGD11). Inaction from governments and their lack of interest in people and nature, were perceived as strong disincentives to youth climate action:

> **Facilitator:** Ok, so you think there is a lack of unity, would you say that is the main barrier?
> **Melena:** (…) I feel like I can't do anything about it, (…) and if everyone thinks like that what's the point? [laughs] if I were president of the country, but …
> **Facilitator:** (…) Do you feel the same? (…)
> **Taís:** I feel (…) they're political barriers really, you know (…) I think it's, I'm thinking here of things that I heard recently in a debate about another COP, (…) to discuss climate change and then, (…) they invited, supposedly activists, people from civil society to

> come in there, but then at the tables where they make decisions the activists can't be there. (…) I think debating climate justice without debating models of capitalist development is a trap (…)
> **Facilitator:** Heidi, do you agree with that?
> **Heidi:** Yes, I think we were talking until now about many barriers: individualism, ego, capitalism, everything is political, I think everything is a big barrier that makes us not think together, and does not see nature as something that has to be preserved (…)
>
> (FGD11, Melena, 23, Taís, 29, Heidi, 22)

Interestingly, this rich interaction with three young Brazilian women shows different perspectives on the responsibility to address climate change. On the one hand, Melena signals her lack of belief in the power of individual action. On the other hand, Taís and Heidi underline their disbelief in the will of politicians and political institutions. The generalised disbelief in the efficacy of political institutions was extended to other political actions, such as demonstrations, as exemplified in the following excerpt from a focus group with younger participants living in an underserved neighbourhood:

> **Bernardo:** There are demonstrations …
> **Joana:** Demonstrations to get to the … .
> **Bernardo:** But often they [politicians] readily silence us, they try to silence us, but we can make many demonstrations. Some, like, they hear this stuff …
> **Joana:** Yes, yes. It's this thing, this thing of listening but doing nothing …
> **Bernardo:** They listen, they listen, but then they don't do anything … There's something in that saying … if you want something done well, you might as well do it yourself …
> **Natália:** Of course, for there to be change, it doesn't necessarily have to be, it doesn't necessarily have to come from a policy or someone … slightly superior … you see … of course, it can and should start from us, society, with these small examples that each of us gave: how to save water, save energy, do not throw garbage on the floor, recycle, sensitise and raise awareness … so, I think that these types of activities for awareness and sensitisation are extremely important. The simple fact of informing … because there are people who do nothing, or that do not want to do anything, just because they are not informed, they simply do not have information about it …
>
> (FGD3, Bernardo, 17, Joana, 17, Natália, 16)

This excerpt illustrates a lack of perceived power to change things through protests and demonstrations. Bernardo, Joana and Natália, all high school students from underserved communities, ended up concluding that politicians 'listen but do nothing'. Thus, the best pathway to influence change is – they believe – to raise awareness, share information and keep doing what they already do within their own local contexts and through individual actions.

Additionally, many participants in our study expressed that they did not have a space to express their concerns. At the 'adults' table,' they are not 'taken seriously', and access to politicians is scarce. Most participants agreed that their opinions were utterly underestimated, just for being young:

> **Mariana:** This also happens because the Government does not have people as young as it should have. The Government, most of the Government, the largest percentage are people of a certain age. They don't have our current mindset.
> **Facilitator:** That's what I was going to ask you. If there were people aged 16, like you, voting and being part of the decisions …
> **Gualter:** It would help!

Fiona: It would help a lot, because most of them are seniors and I think there are seniors who still, hum, are very apologists of Salazar's time (Portuguese dictator)
Mariana: But that also [it has a lot to do]
Fiona: [That's why]
Mariana: [Being born in a century] different from ours
Gualter: It's true …
Mariana: We grew up in this century, we have another vision.

(GDF2, Mariana, 18; Gualter, 17; Fiona, 19)

In summary, regarding perceived barriers, we found a strong lack of perceived power to engage and influence climate action. Many participants believed their actions were insufficient or that their participation could not make any difference. This sense of powerlessness was found in all focus groups but was particularly strong among younger participants and those living in underserved communities. One positive conviction was the perception shared by many participants that youth could bring fresh perspectives and unique knowledge to political-related issues based on their own lived experiences. Ultimately, despite their feelings of disempowerment and their scepticism in conventional politics, our participants seem to reclaim more opportunities and spaces to collectively create political alternatives and imagine different futures.

'We lack a space to dream': the challenge of imagining the future

The dialogues among the participants were more fluid when they addressed the issues that were affecting them in the present. The task of imagining future political alternatives was more challenging, particularly among younger participants. Young people living in underserved neighbourhoods often mentioned that they 'couldn't imagine' what an alternative future could look like at all (e.g. Bárbara, FGD17). Barriers to political imagination of the future included current feelings of disempowerment, 'I can't do anything about it' (Carlos, FGD12), or notions that they lack key resources to change the way things are, such as enough information or critical education about climate change. The 'lack of a space to dream' was how a young migrant (Heidi, FGD11) described her difficulty in thinking about the future.

As can be seen in the interaction below, often participants would 'return' to the present moment, citing current concerns and issues hindering their daily lives:

Gualter: I, I think that in relation to what they were talking about [better futures], for poverty in Portugal, for example, I think they should increase both pensions and salaries, because I see stories of elderly people who, after the increase in the rents, did not have money to pay. I saw a case last week on television of a 76-year-old elderly person who ended up [going to]
Iris: [To the street]
(…)
Mariana: My mother now does not work, [my nuclear family] it is just me, my mother and my brother. How is my mother going to support a house and two children with the prices as they are?
Jamila: I'm the same, too. It's my grandmother, my mother, and me. And my mother works … poor thing, [works for us all].

(FGD2, Gualter, 17, Iris, 17, Jamila, 18, Mariana, 18)

When we explored more thoroughly how participants envisioned a pathway into 'just futures', many answers mentioned collective action, showing that minoritised youth's political imaginaries revolve around sharing responsibilities and overcoming 'individualism and selfishness', as expressed below:

> **Facilitator:** But how do you look to the future? How do you see the world, if you could put into practice the things you said …
> **Natalia:** Green everything! Healthy, beautiful I guess, like, amazing even! …
> **Bernardo**: … Yeah, beautiful! And everyone was going to be so much happier, happier …
> **Co-facilitator:** What would that imply in terms of … How do we have to relate to each other to get there?
> **Natalia**: We couldn't be so individualistic.
> **Alice:** Working as a group …
> **Joana:** Because the biggest problem … or rather, maybe it is not what causes climate change, but a part of it, is greed, individualism, selfishness …
> **Bernardo:** Human beings are always very self-centred … even if we in the future surpass it … There will always be problems. Even if we put this problem beyond, there will always be people with their minds set on the wrong direction.
>
> (FGD3, Natália, 16, Bernardo, 17 Alice, 16, Joana, 17)

The 'advancement' of society was envisioned alongside imaginaries of social equality and more support available to vulnerable communities. More cooperation between countries towards a fairer and more sustainable global development was a desired change mentioned by a few participants. Among young migrants, a few decolonial perspectives were also discussed. 'Buen Vivir' (*Good Life*), an indigenous-based ideology from South America, and African philosophy 'Ubuntu' (*I am because you are*) were cited as inspirations to reimagine a more just world:

> **Leopoldo:** I think we need to go through a paradigm shift. [Um:um]. We in Africa have one, we have a consciousness that says UBUNTU, that is, I am because we are ((various voices: Hum:um)). That is, unity is going to be very paramount in the sense that, if I lack water, I know that he will give me water. If I need a ride to go to work, I know you'll give me a ride. That is, we need to look more at the question of unity with other eyes, to leave a little bit the question of capitalism behind, because if we continue to be moved by material wealth we will not get there. If resources are finite in the planet, resources will not last for long, then we have to have another solution, we have to join hands (…)
>
> (FGD10, Leopoldo, 30)

Anticipations of what could happen in the future gave youth opportunities to examine potential alternatives and practices to build a new society. In our study, these alternatives were inextricably linked to notions of a revitalised democracy, centred in community care, equality and social justice. Participants had difficulties imagining how to get there, but they were consensus that they should be a part of the debate. For this to happen, structural inequalities affecting their communities and territories need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Conclusion

In this article, we sought to explore how minoritised youth engage with climate change and how they perceive their agency in shaping and imagining political alternatives. This has been an underexplored issue in previous literature (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024), and our findings contribute to a better understanding of how minoritised youth engage with climate change despite the multiple barriers. Overall, our analysis suggests three main relevant findings that relate to prioritising community needs, barriers to youth climate activism and the challenge of political imagination.

Firstly, we saw that participants tend to privilege forms of action based on their local communities' needs. They shared several environmental concerns and were seeking to respond to such concerns through everyday individual and localised forms of actions. From their perspectives, there is a need to prioritise action focusing on community's needs rather than climate change issues. Most did not see a clear link between climate and social justice, which may be leading them to prioritise other political causes, namely dealing with pressing local difficulties and injustices. We argue that this may help explain their lack of engagement with climate activism. In contrast, previous research with youth climate activists found a strong awareness of the intersectionality of causes and struggles (e.g. global and local) (e.g. Kowasch et al. 2021; Malafaia 2022). In our study, only a few older participants explicitly connected climate change with global dimensions of social justice and saw climate change as an intersectional issue. These were participants with lived experiences in countries in the Global South and/or with experiences of activism in other causes (e.g. feminism). In our view, these findings also suggest the importance of giving more centrality to the voices of young people with diverse lived experiences, as their informed perspectives can help to bring new and more inclusive contributions to the climate debate.

Secondly, our analysis suggested that minoritised youth perceived several barriers to engaging in climate activism and felt disempowered in many ways. Confronted with daily structural obstacles (e.g. cost of living crisis, housing precariousness) affecting their families, schools and communities, our participants express several pessimistic views on the possibilities of effecting political changes. This was associated with a shared sense of abandonment by conventional politics and distrust in political institutions and politicians, a pattern often found in studies with young people and political participation (e.g. Barrett and Zani 2014; Dahl et al. 2018; Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2014). Likewise, participants, particularly the youngest from underserved communities, shared a broad sentiment of being unprepared to engage politically with climate change. They reclaimed more spaces to learn about climate change and emphasised a lack of knowledge in relation to this issue. Furthermore, several participants argued that their perspectives and lived experiences are often subbed and invisibilised in spaces of political participation and that adults (particularly but not only politicians) do not take them seriously. Similar findings have been found with minoritised youth groups in other contexts (Walker 2020) as well as with activists (e.g. Malafaia 2022). To counteract their feelings of disempowerment, some participants turn to localised actions, such as modelling pro-environmental behaviours in their communities, or organising communal care initiatives, as shown in previous studies (Walker 2020; Wilson and Snell 2010). In different ways and

through diverse experiences, minoritised youth in our study showed that they envision a society that puts social justice and the needs of communities at the forefront of politics.

Thirdly, many of the barriers associated with disengagement from climate activism are relevant to understanding the lack of political imagination found in our study. Several participants struggled with the questions related to the future. Lack of perceived power and inability to effect change were common perceptions among the participants. Additionally, they conveyed the idea that more opportunities and resources were needed to exercise their citizenship fully and equally. Our analysis suggests that pessimistic views of conventional politics, adultism, and lack of access to key resources such as education on climate change shape how minoritised youth see themselves as political agents, as well as their ability to imagine different futures (Bowman 2020; Fernandes-Jesus, Ribeiro, and Malafaia 2012; Malafaia et al. 2018; Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024). Although these findings align with previous research with white and middle-class youth activists (e.g. Kowasch et al. 2021), we argue that these obstacles are particularly ubiquitous for minoritised youth. Underserved communities in Portugal are affected by structural disadvantages, struggling with unequal access to housing, transportation and education, among other challenges. These inequalities limit their access to spaces of climate action and activism, which is likely to make their demands and the richness and complexity of their lived experiences prone to being excluded from political participation.

It is important to highlight at this point that minoritised youth is a diverse group, and while we considered different types of structural disadvantages, more research is needed with other youth groups and across different territories. For example, future research could expand the analysis to the perspectives of minoritised youth living in the Portuguese Islands and/or in rural communities, as these contexts are often associated with high levels of poverty and social exclusion (Rodrigues 2023; Simões, do Carmo, and Fernandes 2023). Overall, more attention is needed to how existing structural contextual inequalities limit access to opportunities to imagine and create alternative futures. Additionally, young people living in underserved communities have specific particularities and singularities that were not fully examined in this study. For example, Roma youth often live in underserved territories and are exposed to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in areas such as housing, employment and education (e.g. Magano and D'Oliveira 2022). While some participants in our study identified as Roma people, we did not look at the specific challenges faced by this youth group. Similarly, immigrant youth communities are a diverse group experiencing different barriers to their participation and integration on the basis of their class, gender and race (Fernandes-Jesus, Ribeiro, and Malafaia 2012, 2014; Ribeiro et al. 2014a). While we acknowledged the importance of employing an intersectional lens when exploring climate activism and political imagination among minoritised groups, these structural barriers were not fully examined in our analysis. Future research should seek to present disaggregated data (e.g. by different genders), which is likely to lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of social categories and identities in shaping experiences of climate activism among youth groups.

Another important limitation in our study relates to the shortcomings in how the discussions around climate futures and political imagination evolved. For some participants, imagining and discussing alternative futures was difficult, which suggests that future studies should move towards more participatory and arts-based methods. Specifically, participatory

and arts-based methods (e.g. photovoice) may be more effective in eliciting and fostering political imaginaries, surpassing existing representations and barriers of what the future may look like. These types of methods rely on creative and engaging techniques that may enhance young people's expression, reflexivity and imagination (Sitas et al. 2022).

Despite some limitations, our research offers key contributions to the understanding of the conditions and barriers that shape how minoritised youth relate to climate activism and political imagination. Importantly, our research shows that minoritised youth want a voice in the political debates about climate change, but they face many structural barriers that constrain their agency and sense of power. At a policy level, these findings illustrated that more opportunities should be created for young people to influence the design of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies. Moving our societies towards climate justice futures requires including minoritised groups and communities in the design, participation and implementation of climate solutions (e.g. Mikulewicz et al. 2023). From an educational perspective, our findings suggest the importance of rethinking the role of schools in facilitating knowledge and action towards climate change. Climate community profiling, for example, is a promising approach to promoting youth participation in climate adaptation (Pinheiro et al. 2024). The climate movement would also benefit from mobilising minoritised youth groups to the climate debate. Young people from marginalised contexts and backgrounds may be prioritising social justice rather than climate-related action. This does not mean, however, that they are not interested in climate change. Minoritised youth groups may benefit from campaigns and intervention programmes that raise awareness of the intersectionality involved in climate change while addressing and intervening in such intersecting struggles (e.g. climate and racism). Bringing their voices and experiences to climate activism spaces would contribute to increasing diversity and inclusion among social movements, which may lead to the construction of more inclusive radical climate imaginaries. These practices could help our societies to envision opportunities for more equitable future communities (Mikulewicz et al. 2023) and more inclusive dialogues about such desired climate futures could help to bridge territorial and social divides, contributing to strengthening climate justice.

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