
FROM BARRIER TO ENABLER: FIVE KEY CONSIDERATIONS TOWARDS POSITIVELY CENTRING THE SOCIAL IN THE GREEN WORKSHOP SUMMARY – EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND SOCIETY WORKSHOP 1

WORKSHOP DATE: 18 MAY 2021

Introduction

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has emphatically stated that “there can be no Green Deal without a Social Deal”. In a recent interview, Frans Timmermans, European Commissioner for Climate Action, himself called for a greater focus on the social issue, claiming it could become “the biggest stumbling block” towards climate neutrality.

Yet, there is more to this task than purely ensuring the Green Deal manages its social impacts: what remains to be determined are the practical ways in which “the social” and “the green” can strongly support each other. To collectively explore this nexus, E3G brought together a broad range of stakeholders in a workshop titled “European Green Deal and Society”. With the “Fit for 55” package set to be launched on 14th July 2021, the first workshop was a means of starting a timely dialogue to raise mutual awareness on the breadth and depth of the social dimension of the Green Deal and eventually foster a joined-up approach towards facilitating its implementation beyond the upcoming legislative package. It is important to note that E3G’s role was that of a convener in this process.

Workshop participants included representatives from trade unions, consumer groups, and tenant associations through to those working on climate justice, gender equality, education, health, social housing, energy poverty, open governance, citizen participation, among others. The following takeaways emerged from the group discussion as being critical to the successful implementation of the European Green Deal:

1. Establish a positive transition narrative beyond ‘co-benefits’

-
2. Strengthen inclusion and participation in decision making and implementation
 3. Connect the local with the national and supra-national level
 4. Align policies and build on existing guidelines and strategies
 5. Consider additional metrics to measure progress

Key takeaways corresponding to key outcomes of a Social Green Deal

Takeaway 1: Establish a transition narrative beyond ‘co-benefits’

Outcome 1: Benefits for people are at the heart of climate action

There was near unanimity amongst participants on the need to develop a novel narrative around the climate transition, backed by practical action, that is more positive in its framing. Many felt that the current public discourse on climate change is both negative and inaccurate as people do not trust that they will be better off economically, even though a significant majority accepts that there is a need to act. To improve this situation, it was suggested that more positive stories be collected and shared as evidence of the benefits that the climate transition can bring to households and communities. At the same time, participants were clear that any narrative setting must be matched by concrete policy tools to anticipate economic change and mitigate any potential negative effects, especially for those who have been disproportionately affected by climate change despite having contributed to it the least.

Similarly, it was observed that the framing of the Green Deal itself was limited due to its extensive focus on sectors instead of people and the impact of climate policies on people’s lives. This means, for instance, placing a greater focus on addressing energy and climate injustices, opportunities, and health inequalities – and therefore people – instead of mainly emphasising technical and economic benefits, such as energy performance and the falling cost of renewables. Participants were also in agreement on a shift from talking about “co-benefits”, such as jobs, clean air, improved health – which governments have obligations to provide – to placing these at the heart of both a more positive narrative and climate action itself.

Takeaway 2: Strengthen inclusion and participation in decision making and implementation

Outcome 2: Democracy is reinvigorated

Inclusive engagement was thought to be instrumental to the success of the Green Deal. Participants underlined the disproportionate influence that incumbent industrial actors have on climate policy and decision making, compounded by the lack of sufficient public interest representation, and underdeveloped structures for the involvement of citizen voices at the EU level. Active inclusion was seen as essential. In addition to including marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities and migrants, the role of women as “actors of change” was reiterated by several participants. The lack of a gender dimension to the Green Deal, despite gender inequality being highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, was listed as a major concern.

Overall, there was broad consensus that everyone, including workers, consumers, tenants, residents, etc. should also have the agency and autonomy to make their voices heard on climate action. Co-creation and bottom-up policy making was singled out as a means to achieve this and accordingly ensure climate justice. The need for social dialogue and collective bargaining to ensure green jobs are “high quality” was also emphasised. Participants called for more democratic exercises, such as citizen assemblies, but stipulated that these be better resourced and supported to encourage meaningful participation across all regions. To demonstrate a long-term public mandate, it was proposed that the Green Deal support the wider reinvigoration of democracy in Europe by strengthening public participation in a single connected process rather than disconnected one-off exercises.

Takeaway 3: Connect the local with the national and supra-national level

Outcome 3: Strong transition governance builds on all the capacities available

It was clear to participants that the steer towards climate neutrality cannot come solely from the European Commission. Cities and regions – as both the major cause of, and solution to, climate change – need to play a central role in the design and execution of Green Deal policies. Better integrating the EU level with the local, regional, and city level was therefore underlined. However, it was recommended that this integration be accompanied by more support and resourcing for civil society to understand, influence and implement the Green Deal at this level. Exploring possibilities for joined-up action to connect the local level to the EU, and bring in public voice across the different levels, was also identified as being key to the process.

Takeaway 4: Align policies and build on existing guidelines and strategies

Outcome 4: Joined-up action delivers better outcomes for all people

Participants stressed the need to move away from a traditional siloed approach towards more holistic, integrated climate action. The linking of public and private sectors, through strong and profound partnerships, also resonated with participants, not least as these structures can facilitate more accurate data collection – which was listed as a current gap – and provide a more comprehensive overview of issues. The need to build on existing guidelines, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s Just Transition Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), was emphasised. Alignment with social strategies, such as Rights of the Child and the European Pillar of Social Rights, that do not strictly fall under the purview of climate but are nevertheless crucial to linking both climate and social policy, and accordingly contributing to the success of the Green Deal, was also underlined.

Takeaway 5: Consider additional metrics to measure progress

Outcome 5: Economies are more resilient

Although economic growth is an important measure of progress, participants regarded the significance that is currently attached to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as being problematic due to its narrow scope on macroeconomics, which does not fully acknowledge lived realities on the ground and distributional impacts. The concept of a care economy and social value was put forward as an alternative whereby care – for nature and one another – serves as a motor for the economy, with policies that foster well-being as well as market growth. Complementary indicators that capture these concepts were also recommended.

Summary reflections

Although Commissioner Timmermans' warning needs to be heeded, the above takeaways indicate that it is possible to do more than just avoid the social dimension from becoming a barrier to the climate transition – it can in effect be an enabler of more inclusive and participatory climate action, and ultimately a more just, comprehensive, and successful European Green Deal.

The European Green Deal and Society workshops

This series of workshops arose from the identified need to strengthen the social dimension of Green Deal policies so as to leave no-one behind. Each workshop brings together a range of civil society organisations working at the social–climate nexus.

The workshops are convened by independent climate change think tank E3G and take place under Chatham House rules. The points raised in the published summaries do not represent the official policy or position of individual participants or organisations. Instead, they outline themes collectively identified as required to enable a fair, inclusive, and Social Green Deal.

Participating organisations

Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, Sanna Markkanen

Citizens' Climate Europe, James Collis

Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, Elif Gündüzyeli

Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, Isabelle Brachet

Democratic Society, Nadja Nickel

Democratic Society, Anthony Zacharzewski

Energy Cities, Claire Roumet

European Consumer Association (BEUC), Dimitri Vergne

European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), Zoltán Massay-Kosubek

European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), Ekaterina Efimenko

European Urban Agenda Housing Partnership & City of Vienna, Michaela Kauer

Gender Five Plus, Barbara Helfferich

Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), Anne Stauffer

Heinrich Böll Foundation, Martin Keim

Housing Europe, Julien Dijol

IndustriALL European Trade Union, Judith Kirton-Darling

IndustriALL European Trade Union, Corinna Zierold

International Union of Tenants (IUT), Barbara Steenbergen

Open Governance Network for Europe (OGNfE), Maria Koomen

Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI), Ellen Riotte

Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI), Emily Stewart

Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), Laetitia van der Vennet

University of Manchester (European Energy Poverty Observatory), Stefan Bouzarovski

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Katie Treadwell

E3G: Theresa Griffin, Pedro Guertler, Larissa Gross, Manon Dufour, Rebekka Popp, and Namita Kampli



This activity has received funding from the LIFE Programme of the European Union. This work reflects the authors' views and does not commit donors.