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A POSITIVE NARRATIVE FOR A JUST TRANSITION

AN APPROACH TO A MORE PEOPLE-CENTRED COMMUNICATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 6

INTRODUCTION 8

1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JUST TRANSITION 10

2 NARRATIVES HINDERING EFFECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION 12

3 EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES FOR CLIMATE ACTION 15

3.1 IMMEDIACY AND ROOTEDNESS 16

3.2 THE POWER OF EXAMPLES 17

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY COMMUNICATION 17

4 A PEOPLE-CENTRED NARRATIVE FOR A JUST TRANSITION 18

4.1 DISTRIBUTING COSTS, SHARING BENEFITS 19

4.2 PUBLIC HEALTH 20

4.3 TERRITORIAL AND INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE 21

4.3.1 Think global, act local 22

4.3.2 What about agriculture? 23

4.3.3 Global and migration 23

4.4 DEMOCRACY 24

4.4.1 The good, the bad and the ugly 24

4.4.2 Strengthening workplace democracy 25

4.4.3 Self-effectiveness and local engagement 25

CONCLUSION 27

ENDNOTES 29

AUTHORS, ABOUT FEPS & PARTNERS 33

ABOUT THE AUTHORS 34

ABOUT FEPS AND PARTNERS 35

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This policy study develops the basis for a convincing narrative on the just transition. We first identify some of the obstacles that currently stand in the way of effective climate communication, making specific mention of some ideas about climate psychology, and analyse a number of narratives that actively jeopardise climate action. These include narratives of denial, delay and doom. Following that, we provide an example of how a different, justice-based narrative can be created, based on concrete examples of effective climate action across communities in the EU. Finally, we give recommendations that can be used to adopt and deliver positive climate narratives more broadly.

We recommend a focus on social justice when thinking about climate action, so it accounts for socio-economic disparities, racism, and gender inequalities. Ignoring these aspects can lead to socially unjust outcomes, such as "renovictions" and green gentrification.

It is crucial to develop narratives that highlight the immediate impacts of the climate crisis on everyday life, linking these effects to broader social injustices. This approach helps to create more relatable and urgent narratives, countering the trend of viewing climate action as beneficial only in the long term.

In order to do so, we recommend creating a narrative that makes reference to the impacts of the climate crisis in a specific location. To avoid false solutions, the threat of green colonialism or an overly simplified not-in-my-backyard environmentalism, we recommend drawing connections to global climate and environmental justice concerns.

Showcasing successful climate actions that also address social issues can reduce feelings of helplessness and motivate democratic engagement. It is important to emphasize the mutual benefits of these actions, such as improvements in quality of life, which can transcend political divides and appeal directly to individual and community interests.

In terms of policy communication, it is essential to articulate the co-benefits of climate action, addressing immediate and long-term interests of affected populations. This includes presenting climate action as an enhancement to public health, economic stability, and social well-being, while offering concrete examples of sustainable practices and their benefits to demystify and garner support for climate policies.

INTRODUCTION

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The climate crisis is the issue of our time and affects everyone on this planet personally. Worries about the existential threat posed by it consistently show up in opinion polls, with a recent Eurobarometer survey testifying to the fact that more than three quarters of EU citizens think that climate change is a very serious and urgent problem.[1] Another survey suggests that 88% of the EU population support a socially just transition from fossil fuels that leaves no one behind.[2] Considering these figures, it seems surprising that policymakers often cite a lack of popular support as the reason why more effective climate action is not taken. This could be because, while EU citizens overwhelmingly want a just transition, only 46% of them are confident that by 2050 "sustainable energy, products and services will be affordable for everyone, including poorer people".[3] While there is great support for effective climate action in theory, there is a high level of doubt as to whether the envisaged transition will also be accessible and socially just. This worry is often further exacerbated by narratives that purposefully put social justice and climate action into opposition, casting doubt on the overall feasibility of socially just climate action.

"It seems surprising that policymakers often cite a lack of popular support as the reason why more effective climate action is not taken."

To develop recommendations to overcome this divide, this policy study starts with an outline of the history of the concept of a just transition and then outlines some of the reasons why dominant narratives that discourage effective climate action tend to be successful. It then goes on to discuss what an alternative narrative needs to take into account to be effective and successful. The next section provides an overview of how the costs of climate action can be distributed and its risks mutualised, while benefits are justly shared. Finally, the focus is on how climate action can contribute to resolving systemic injustices and discrimination, thus also leading to healthier and more resilient democracies. As its guiding thread, the narrative elaborated in this study focuses particularly on procedural, distributive and recognition justice.

1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JUST TRANSITION

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“In 2015, the concept was inscribed in the preamble of the Paris Climate Agreement, which stated that the signatory parties agreed to take "into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs.”

The concept of a just transition has its roots in syndicalism struggles in the USA in the 1970s. Union leaders, notably of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers’ union, were aware that nuclear disarmament would – while being good for the environment and people – result in job losses for workers in the industry, and thus, they demanded the creation of a fund to support workers that would fall into unemployment if their working sector became obsolete due to its environmental impact.[4] In the decades that followed, the concept evolved further and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union began to ally with labour and frontline communities until the Just Transition Alliance was founded in 1997. In the 2000s, the concept spread from the USA and was adopted by the International Trade Union Confederation. In the years leading up to 2015, the International Labour Organization carried out work to develop its “Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all”. Finally, in 2015, the concept was inscribed in the preamble of the Paris Climate Agreement, which stated that the signatory parties agreed to take “into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities”.[5] In 2018, Climate Walks, undertaken by thousands of young people around the world, put the achievement of the climate goals at the heart of government agendas. In December 2019, the European Commission announced a European Grean Deal to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. As part of the implementation of the European Green Deal, the just transition has been identified as a key pillar of the European Commission’s new strategy. The goal of “leaving no one behind” is self-evident: the transition will be just, or there will be no transition at all.

Part of this strategy has been the implementation of a Just Transition mechanism, which aims to provide “support to mobilise at least €100 billion over the period 2021-2027 in the most affected regions, to alleviate the socio-economic impact of the transition”.[6] The financing of this mechanism comes out of three main pillars: a Just Transition Fund; a scheme under Invest EU, which seeks to mobilise up to €45 billion through attracting private investments in sustainable domains; and a public sector loan facility. The Just Transition Fund enabled the creation of territorial just transition plans and consists of financing from EU funds, the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus and additional national resources.[7] And on top of that, the Social Climate Fund, adopted in May 2023, aims to mitigate the impact of a new CO2 tax on buildings and road transport called ETS2.

Following this, the Council of the EU also adopted a recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality, setting out measures to protect those most affected by the transition in June 2022.[8] In December 2023, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the Exploratory Opinion “Advancing the EU’s just transition policy framework: what measures are necessary” at the request of the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU, whose priorities included the advancement of a just transition.[9] A European Alliance for Just Transition was launched in 2021, consisting of 41 member organisations at the time of writing, calling on the institutions of the EU, national governments and other authorities to act for a just transition for all.[10]

2. NARRATIVES HINDERING EFFECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION

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Many have pointed out that the lack of effective climate action is, at least in some part, facilitated by an abundance of climate denialist, delayerist and doomist discourses, as well as a flood of disinformation.[11] All this affects public opinion and hinders effective decision-making, and consequently, these narratives tend to lead to little or no effective action, but instead overwhelmingly further the interests of economic and political actors who benefit from the status quo.

When speaking of denialist narratives, this notably means discourses that spread doubt about the scientific truth behind the climate crisis, suggesting that global warming is not happening, does not pose a threat or is not caused by industrial activities such as fossil fuel emissions. Indeed, it is now widely known that fossil fuel companies, such as Total Energies, Shell or Exxon Mobil,[12] have regularly spread disinformation and denied the reality of the climate crisis for decades.

Delayerist narratives function in a similar, yet perhaps more insidious way, by acknowledging the existence of the climate crisis, while casting doubt on how fast effective climate action can or should be taken. Instead, they often make use of tactics such as individualism, technological optimism, fossil fuel greenwashing or an opposition to climate action based on appeals to social justice in the face of economic costs.[13]

Finally, narratives of doom that put a strong emphasis on the negative consequences of the climate crisis persist in all layers of public discourse, from climate policy discussion by the media to civil society discourses, leading to a psychological disconnect from the subject matter induced by a state of learned hopelessness.[14]

"Climate psychology offers a large array of explanations as to why these narratives tend to be successful."

Climate psychology offers a large array of explanations as to why these narratives tend to be successful. Humans tend to reject information they find unsettling and a lack of scientific understanding of the crisis, as well as the pervasiveness of narratives discouraging from effective climate action, all contribute to their success.[15] Unlike other environmental crises, such as reactor accidents or oil spills, the impacts of the climate crisis are not immediate and often occur in a seemingly non-linear way. The correlation between, for example, a *warming* climate and weather phenomena such as *extreme cold* due to a shifting polar vortex are neither intuitive nor immediately clear to the general population.[16] These, and similar, apparently contradictory events can be instrumentalised to further fuel denialist narratives. While there is a theoretical awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis, some of its most concrete consequences, such as droughts or mis-harvests, remain distant and difficult to grasp for highly urbanised populations. As a result of long supply chains obscuring real, current shortages, urban dwellers are still able to, for example, buy food in supermarkets, and thus, underestimate the already existing effect of the climate crisis on agricultural production. Particularly in the EU, where 72% of the population live in cities[17] (with this figure projected to increase to around 83.7% by 2050[18]), communities are often not only physically, but also emotionally, distanced from the land that sustains them.[19] At the same time, the proposed solutions to the climate crisis can be seen as disruptive to lifestyles, which can lead to their rejection.[20]

"Recent years were marked by the intensifying polycrisis. Despite strong public support for the European Green Deal, climate measures are under political pressure when it comes to the distributive consequences of their implementation."

Recent years were marked by the intensifying polycrisis. Despite strong public support for the European Green Deal,[21] climate measures are under political pressure when it comes to the distributive consequences of their implementation, with some shifting the blame for the increasing cost-of-living crisis from high inflation and the war in Ukraine onto green policies.[22] Others have argued that the multiple interrelated crises Europe faces can only be solved by transforming energy systems and ambitious climate action.[23]

An impressive example of how climate delayerist narratives can be fuelled by concerns about an unjust transition are the misleading campaigns of the European People's Party (EPP) against the introduction of the Nature Restoration Law in summer 2023. Despite clear evidence that nature restoration is not only a necessity to save biodiversity and combat climate change, but also a prerequisite for food security and economically beneficial, the law was strongly opposed by the EPP. The European Parliament's right-wing political group claimed that the law would threaten the traditional livelihoods of farmers and fishers, and thus, be economically damaging for producers and consumers, as well as disrupt supply chains, destroy urban areas and decrease food production.[24]

Another example of the combined impact of delayerist narratives on effective climate legislation can be observed in the German ruling coalition's effective failure to facilitate the installation of climate-friendly heat pumps through improvements to the existing Building Energy Law.[25] Changes to the law had initially been enshrined in the coalition treaty between social democrats, greens and liberal democrats, but their implementation proved to be a trial by fire for the unlikely coalition, characterised by long-lasting periods of infighting, notably between greens and liberal democrats, as well as highly emotional campaigns run by the Christian Democratic Union and polemic newspaper campaigns. This was in no small part due to shortcomings in the social justice aspect of an early version of the law, which was leaked by the right-wing populist press. The legislation that finally ended up coming into effect has been described by many as apparently (though still not sufficiently) more socially just, but effectively simply a hollowed-out version of what was initially promised.[26] In this case, the fear of immediate negative consequences (such as heating becoming unaffordable, fuelled by the gas shortages due to the Russia-Ukraine war) overshadowed the more diffuse and distant fear of the climate crisis. Ultimately, an exaggerated narrative of socially unjust legislation, which would come at a high cost for those hit hard by inflation, hindered effective climate action.

"In both cases, the fear of immediate negative consequences was instrumentalised and used against scientific evidence to overshadow the more diffuse and distant fear of the climate crisis."

In both cases, the fear of immediate negative consequences was instrumentalised and used against scientific evidence to overshadow the more diffuse and distant fear of the climate crisis. As such, they can be seen as textbook examples of a situation in which narratives were used to turn environmental legislation into a partisan issue[27] and demonstrate how narratives that oppose social justice and climate action can take centre stage and decisively impact discourse and climate policy.

3. EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES FOR CLIMATE ACTION

3. EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES FOR CLIMATE ACTION

3.1 Immediacy and rootedness

Opposing social justice and climate action not only slows down environmental action, but also bypasses the recognition aspect of climate justice. The crisis has disproportionately different effects on people, depending on characteristics such as socio-economic status, gender, race, (dis)ability, age and nationality.[28] However, a green transition that does not take into account these same inequalities risks doing the same thing, causing problems such as renovictions and green gentrification (oftentimes particularly affecting racialised populations and more broadly those affected by intersecting inequalities), but also engendering socially blind policies, such as the implementation of environmental taxes that are perceived as socially unjust. Examples can be found in the taxation of fuel that was at the root of the French Yellow Vests Protest Movement,[29] but also in the more recent farmers protests across the EU. Protesters were, in large parts, opposed to increased environmental legislations perceived to be an additional burden on a sector already deeply affected by economic precarity.[30] Ultimately, a socially unjust and inaccessible green transition risks leaving large swathes of the population simply unable to participate in it, which will, at the same time, decrease its effectiveness. From a communications perspective, it is therefore important to point out the connections between existing social injustices and the root causes of the climate crisis, to make it clear how people are already immediately impacted by the climate crisis.

"A socially unjust and inaccessible green transition risks leaving large swathes of the population simply unable to participate in it, which will, at the same time, decrease its effectiveness."

An awareness needs to be created that many of the social injustices people are already negatively impacted by in their day-to-day life (such as socio-economic inequalities, racism, sexism or age) also have a direct connection to environmental justice – and that environmental action has the potential to directly and immediately improve citizens' quality of life and well-being. This will enable one of the fundamental decision-making dilemmas regarding the ecological transition to be avoided: individuals see themselves in a position where they have to choose between unsustainable and sustainable options; the unsustainable ones are oftentimes (perceived to be) more likely to yield immediate short-term benefits.[31]

"A key aspect of effective climate communication is the importance of mutual benefits, such as the improvement in quality of life that comes with transition measures."

If a narrative remains rooted in the population's lived experiences and makes direct reference to their everyday lives, it promises to be more directly relatable. In that sense, an understanding can be created, in which climate action can, and must, be presented, not only in terms of the common long-term interest, but crucially also as being in the immediate short-term interest of populations, combining immediate self-interest with the hope for a better future. As such, a key aspect of effective climate communication is the importance of mutual benefits, such as the improvement in quality of life that comes with transition measures.[32] Whilst the climate crisis and the action that has to be taken against it will undoubtedly come with great lifestyle changes, some of which might be perceived negatively, the goal is to move away from a punitive ecology towards giving people a sense of what can be gained by the transition. A focus on improving

quality of life (e.g., reducing air and noise pollution, improving access to healthy food and green spaces), backed up by evidence, is unlikely to be divisive, even across partisan divides. Crucially, crisis-fatigued populations are unlikely to act against what is perceived to be against their immediate self-interest. However, this kind of short-term thinking aggravates the feeling of impending doom engendered by the accelerating climate and ecological crisis, which causes a sentiment of learned helplessness and ultimately inaction. To counteract this, narratives must also put hope at their core, stressing that a better future is possible, if concrete actions are taken to enable it.[33]

3.2 The power of examples

Making use of an existing example not only helps because it counters fearmongering, but it is also crucially effective because it is constructive. It has been demonstrated that a persistent flow of negative news reporting can cause detrimental effects to people's mental well-being. This often leads to a disconnection from the news and leaves an uninformed general public in a state of learned helplessness, and thus, unable to participate in an informed manner in democratic processes and the much-needed ecological transition.[34] Furthermore, as exemplified above, divided and crisis-fatigued populations are unlikely to favour policies that are perceived to be against their immediate self-interest, even if they would bring long-term benefits. A narrative with any hope of succeeding in getting people on board with the ecological transition must reduce people's experience of learned helplessness and give them a sense of ownership and self-efficacy in the face of the multiplying crises of our time. Positive psychological approaches, such as constructive journalism,[35] are said to be likely to decrease learned helplessness, which could, in turn, motivate people not only to support climate policy, but to become actors in the ecological transition themselves, by engaging in climate-active behaviours[36] through bottom-up initiatives.

3.3 Recommendations for policy communication

To summarise, if the climate crisis is perceived to be a real, but vague and non-linear threat, and populations have little confidence that climate action will act in their immediate self-interest, a just transition narrative needs to exemplify that

- combating the climate and environmental crisis will **serve both the immediate and long-term self-interest** of populations, as well as contribute to resolving other crises;
- the climate and environmental crisis **is an immediate threat**, which concerns citizens in their day-to-day life; and
- **there are concrete ways to take climate action** that will immediately improve the lived environment of citizens, which decrease learned helplessness and help to avoid a disconnect from environmental issues.

It must do so, by

- exemplifying the forms of climate action that can effectively tackle inequalities;
- showcasing concrete examples of what a sustainable society could look like; and thus,
- opening up political imaginaries through providing a vision of how existing power imbalances at the root of the climate crisis can be rectified.

Such a psychologically immediate and impactful narrative must include the different dimensions of socio-ecological justice and apply them in an emotionally impactful way that is rooted in people's lived experiences. The guiding thread of this exemplary transformative narrative will be justice. Within this intersectional topic, existing systems of inequalities and discrimination must not be siloed, or even overlooked, but rather take centre stage.

4. A PEOPLE-CENTRED NARRATIVE FOR A JUST TRANSITION

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4.1 Distributing costs, sharing benefits

If the guiding thread of the narrative for a just transition is "justice", it must be based on an understanding that the ecological crisis intersects directly with increasing social injustice. While the following section chiefly focuses on socio-economic injustices, it must be stressed that these intersect with other types of injustices and discrimination. There are significant income and wealth inequalities that are determined by gender,[37] migration status and background,[38] and physical (dis)ability,[39] making progressive social policies indispensable to holistically combat income and wealth inequalities. The 2023 Climate Inequality Report indicates that 10% of global carbon emitters are responsible for almost half of all greenhouse gas emissions,[40] not only due to their personal carbon footprint, but also given their influence on production and legislation.[41] Oxfam's 2023 Climate Equality report points out that, in Europe, a person from the richest 1% emits, on average, 14 times more carbon (CO2) than a person in the bottom 50%. These outsized emissions of Europe's richest will cause 67,800 heat-related excess deaths by 2100, the equivalent of almost 850 deaths every year. Combating wealth inequalities and climate change can and, indeed, should go hand in hand, by lowering the influence of wealth on policy, for example, through the introduction of a progressive tax system. Introducing, for example, an EU net wealth tax would make use of available resources to accelerate the transition without harming those most vulnerable,[42] and thus, ensure that the richest EU households contribute to financing policies that promote sustainability and well-being for all, according to the ability-to-pay principle.

A recent Eurobarometer survey observed that 73% of EU citizens expect their standard of living to decrease in the next year. The main issues that citizens want to see prioritised by the European Parliament is the fight against poverty and social exclusion (36%), as well as public health (34%); these come before concerns about climate action or economic support (both 29%).[43] This is despite European populations generally taking the threat of climate change seriously. It follows that people feel unable to be actors in the transition, because they are primarily concerned with making ends meet. Reassuring populations that the transition can be financed, and that the cost will not be borne by those who already struggle, is thus of crucial importance to ensure public support for climate and environmental action.

At the same time, policies can be imagined that lower or even cut taxes on projects that favour environmental sustainability to empower people to take part in the transition themselves. In Finland, for example, small-scale renewable-energy projects are exempt from energy taxation to promote investments supporting the energy transition.[44]

Where people will be directly negatively affected, for example, during the transition away from environmentally unsustainable sectors, it is important to stress, above all, that those who are working in sectors affected by the transition can be protected through systems of social protection, whilst, at the same time, new jobs are being created in the renewable sector. In Germany, the transition away from coal is accompanied by unemployment insurance and pensions for miners, who were covered by the "miners' pension insurance", which combined statutory and occupational pensions, with higher contributions and better benefits for the years worked in the mines.[45] In Poland's Eastern Wielkopolska region, up to 22,000 new jobs are projected to be created by 2030 in the renewable-

energy sector alone, which would overcompensate for the loss of employment caused by the abandonment of coal.[46] Furthermore, transition efforts can, at the same time, promote gender equality, as has been the case in Spain, where a Just Transition Strategy that incentivised gender equality, 38.1% of the jobs created in coal regions and the energy sector have gone to women.[47]

4.2 Public health

The central aspect of a people-centred narrative on a just transition should be the people themselves, their immediate, physical and mental health – and by extension, the notion of public health. Mainstreaming health, not only in the development of climate policy, but also in the development of narratives on a just transition promises to be convincing, since people are immediately interested in their own and their family's health.[48] A focus on health means that the immediate threat posed by the climate crisis, through factors such as heat-wave mortality, malnourishment and increased risk of pandemics, can be stressed. On the other hand, it offers a large array of positive messages regarding the possible improvement of public health on the climate/health nexus, which allows the messages to steer clear from an overly doomist perspective. Climate-positive policies and behaviour also carry countless health benefits, and many measures that reduce the emission of fossil fuels are also effective at improving public health.[49] In fact, healthcare workers (many of whom are women)[50] have been identified as successful environmental messengers, and nurses' unions are already playing an important role in the fight for climate justice, participating in the struggles against fossil fuel projects and supporting the victims of climate change all around the world.[51]

"Climate-positive policies and behaviour also carry countless health benefits, and many measures that reduce the emission of fossil fuels are also effective at improving public health."

The notion of health can be exemplified by a variety of more concrete messages. Focusing, for example, on air pollution, the message can be put forward that affordable and sustainable mobility systems contribute to combatting the climate crisis and are good for people's health, by reducing air and noise pollution, as well as through favouring active mobility. Indeed, in 2021, 311,000 premature deaths in Europe were caused by air pollution,[52] and a large number of lives will be saved if international recommendations for exposure to air pollution, noise and heat; the performance of physical activity; and access to green space are followed. This can further be supported by messages that make direct reference to the health of people's children and intergenerational solidarity. Similarly to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which much of the rhetoric made recourse to intergenerational solidarity and the protection of elderly citizens and the chronically ill, the climate crisis disproportionately affects young people and the rights of future generations. Indeed, a recent policy study conducted by FEPS demonstrated that people are strongly moved by concerns about their children's health,[53] and a variety of environmental movements and campaigns have been led by parents' (oftentimes specifically mothers') concerns about their children's health.[54]

This rings particularly true for people affected by a variety of systemic injustices. People who live in neighbourhoods with a lower socio-economic status are more affected by air pollution and urban heat, which is attributable to infrastructure such as motorways and low tree coverage.[55] In 2020, French anti-racism activists joined forces with the climate activist group Alternatiba to push for environmental and racial justice together and to protest against air pollution in highly racialised banlieues. One year later, the "house of people's ecology" was opened in the Parisian banlieue Bagnolet, which is heavily affected by ambient air pollution, as well as low levels of tree coverage, favouring urban-heat isles.[56] The *Maison Verdragon* was founded thanks to an initiative by the eco-feminist and explicitly anti-racist "mothers' front", and aims to provide a space for oftentimes racialised and working-class inhabitants to develop a closer relationship with the space they inhabit by doing community work, such as the distribution of vegetables or organising debates about the climate crisis and police violence.[57] The example demonstrates how an anti-racist and

decolonial narrative that counteracts the logic of the centre and periphery is important on a global scale, because it addresses the root causes of the climate crisis lying in colonial exploitation and extractivism, and it allows racialised urban populations, who often suffer from intersecting inequalities detrimental to their physical and mental health, such as poverty, environmental racism (e.g., the lack of access to green spaces, high levels of pollution) and police violence, in the spaces they inhabit, to be included in the conversation.

4.3 Territorial and international justice

Like health, territorial justice is a particularly effective starting point for an impactful narrative. A recent FEPS policy study that tested the effectiveness of environmental narratives on urban Hungarian populations observed that the focus on immediate negative environmental impacts on people's lives, as well as the focus on immediate positive outcomes of environmental action, tend to be perceived as convincing.[58] Similarly, a study conducted in the UK that focused explicitly on individuals with a centre-right worldview came to the conclusion that narratives which focus on the preservation of local landscapes tend to be well received. These kinds of narratives can thus draw on the immediate and often highly emotional connections people have to their homes. Here, links can also be drawn to the promotion of local culture and traditions. There are several cases in which local folklore has contributed to the protection of the environment, for example, in Ireland, where concerns about the destruction of a hawthorn tree, which was said to be a fairy battleground, rerouted a motorway.[59] Similarly, the ecological transition benefits from the knowledge of indigenous people, who are at the forefront of climate and social justice. The Saami community has played a key role in pushing the EU to take sufficient action on climate change, even taking the EU to court over its inadequate greenhouse gas reduction targets for 2018. In Latin America, the concept of *"Buen Vivir"* emerged from indigenous tradition. It means living with dignity, in harmony with nature and with respect for all cultures.

"The ecological transition benefits from the knowledge of indigenous people, who are at the forefront of climate and social justice."

Environmental movements tend to have a higher success rate if they manage to create narratives that include and centre on local populations, who are perceived to be the most legitimate in wanting to preserve their homes and improve their own lived conditions.[60] In the institutional sphere, policymakers can draw from those experiences and act to support local action, which can inspire wider audiences. Concrete examples help to create narratives that focus on immediate impacts that people are already perceiving themselves, such as extreme heat, storms and droughts. This kind of storytelling is less likely to be divisive than using terms such as "climate change" and "climate action", which may be loaded with partisan connotations.[61]

The focus on territorial rootedness applies not only to rural but also urbanised areas, which tend to be particularly affected by poor biodiversity and urban planning that does not take into account environmental concerns. Connections can be drawn to the immediate benefits that come from a sustainable transport system, which allows space to be taken back from cars and returned to people and nature.[62] Visions of more biodiversity-rich cities making recourse to nature-based solutions can be evoked and supported by concrete examples. For instance, the Milanese *"Bosco Verticale"* or "vertical forest" consists of two residential towers (80 and 112 metres high) and testifies to the potential of bringing biodiversity back into highly urbanised areas. The towers were built between 2007 and 2014 and are enveloped by dense vegetation. It is part of a wider project called *"Porta Nova"*, with the objective to transform a 34-hectare neglected area into a business and residential district integrating nature-based solutions.[63] This example can testify to the fact that the move towards carbon neutrality is not only good for people's health and biodiversity in cities, but also helps to empower local actors and develops local initiatives, and thus, creates a virtuous circle of increased territorial rootedness.

4.3.1 Think global, act local

Local populations are often not aware of the localised causes and effects of the climate crisis, which, in turn, makes them less likely to call for concrete environmental measures to be taken in the environment they inhabit. Populations that are emotionally distanced from the land they inhabit are unlikely to see themselves as actors in the transition. This is especially problematic because local and regional communities are often more effective at furthering bottom-up environmental behaviours than national or supra-national institutions, which tend to lack knowledge of specific problems and obstacles on the ground.[64]

"A just transition narrative that encompasses locally and globally just transitions must take this into account and showcase empowered local communities in the Global North and Global South to promote equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships."

In turn, many of the conflicts that shaped social movements on climate action, which later ended up influencing policy making and jurisprudence, arose from a strong local rootedness of the conflict.[65] With globalisation, social movement scholars are increasingly observing the emergence a global civil society.[66] Within it, social movements, trade unions, non-governmental organisations and other organisations are participating in politics across national and cultural borders, whilst, at the same time, maintaining local autonomy over strategies. This grassroots globalisation involves, in particular, the creation of global justice networks, in which alliances are created, information is shared and solidarity is experienced.[67] A just transition narrative that encompasses locally and globally just transitions must take this into account and showcase empowered local communities in the Global North and Global South to promote equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships. This is not only a matter of global solidarity. An awareness of the importance that indigenous people carry in stewarding their natural surroundings is a legitimate argument for their protection, as well as a learning opportunity for communities who have lost the ability to take care of their territories.

This kind of locally rooted narrative, with an awareness of the global implications of the climate crisis, favours democratic engagement and can be effective at bridging the partisan divide, as exemplified by a number of grassroots ecological mobilisations, during which traditionally more-conservative-leaning rural populations allied themselves with activists from the urban left to push back against ecologically destructive projects. An example could be the effective resistance against the airport project of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in Western France, during which traditionally more-conservative local agricultural workers allied with activists from the urban left and ultimately succeeded in the project being abandoned after almost 50 years of grassroots mobilisation. Similar tendencies – coalitions between conservative-leaning local populations and the urban left – could also be observed in the famous French "Battle of the Larzac" against a military base on agricultural land or in the German antinuclear movement of the 1970s.[68] As such, the territorial focus of the respective environmental justice conflict allowed for alliances across the political spectrum.

If an anti-racist and decolonial narrative is successfully created, this could also encompass an increased feeling of global solidarity, which would facilitate taking measures to address the Global North's historical responsibility. It is imaginable, for example, that debt could be cancelled for Global South countries, in recognition of the climate debt accumulated by wealthy, polluting nations due to their role in creating the climate crisis from colonialism to the present day.[69] Overall, equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships must be prioritised over green extractivism, which oftentimes comes at a high cost for local populations, recreates colonial patterns and contributes to biodiversity loss in the Global South.[70]

4.3.2 What about agriculture?

In light of recent farmer mobilisations, particular attention should be paid to the agricultural sector. This is not only because the agricultural sector is responsible for more than 10% of the EU's total greenhouse gas emissions.[71] The sector is also highly vulnerable to the climate crisis through droughts and mis-harvests, and farmers across the EU are negatively affected by increasingly more difficult working conditions; declining revenues, in part, due to international competition and stark inequalities within the agricultural sector itself. Across the EU, rates of farmers have been declining sharply within the past decades, and small-scale farming is threatened by a variety of factors, including tactics comparable to land grabbing, all of which have detrimental effects on local communities.[72] Small farms, in particular, make an important contribution to biodiversity conservation, sustainable food production and ensuring food security.[73] It is thus counterintuitive to add the burden of environmental policy costs to farmers, without simultaneously finding ways to provide for the structural needs arising from shouldering those costs. Agricultural workers, who also ensure access to healthy nutrition, need to be seen as key actors with concrete local knowledge in our understanding of an ecological transition. Many agricultural practices steward nature, and as such render a public service, which should be valued and compensated. The case of farmer protests perhaps best embodies the need to combine social and environmental policies, especially in sectors where the cost of implementing environmental policy falls on those already struggling to make ends meet.

Justice-centred narratives about the agricultural sector also provide an opportunity to link climate action with demands for (migrant) workers' health and safety; they are not only strongly affected by exploitation, but also directly impacted by extreme weather phenomena attributable to the climate crisis, such as extreme heat.[74] A positive example in this respect can be found in Puglia in Italy, where concrete measures were taken to protect outdoor agricultural workers from working under extreme heat, amongst others, by making use of an integrated weather-climatic and epidemiological heat-warning system.[75]

4.3.3 Global and migration

Establishing the connection between territorial justice; access to good-quality food (and thus, health); workers' rights and, by extension, migrant rights allows the creation of a locally rooted narrative that does not lose its global dimension, which is crucial in the context of rapidly strengthening nationalist and racist discourses. In addition to being a matter of solidarity, it becomes increasingly a matter of common sense that narratives should be rooted in an anti-racist and decolonial logic, not least because land grabbing and loss of agricultural land are becoming ever more present in the Global North.[76] A global outlook enables a narrative that steers clear from false solutions which externalise the consequences of the transition, and at times lead to a "green EU" depending on pollution elsewhere. This kind of environmental rhetoric risks being globally unjust and not addressing the causes of the crisis.

The fear of migrants and racism are key aspects of right-wing narratives, while the climate crisis is a driver of migration globally, with figures projecting as many as 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050.[77] If a counternarrative hopes to be successful, it cannot shy away from these talking points. It must instead shine a light on the dynamics that cause migration on a global, local and intra-national level. It must demonstrate that a decolonial prism is necessary, not just from a global solidarity perspective, but also to protect local communities in the Global North and South from harmful and destructive practices inflicted on the land they inhabit. On the other hand, this decolonial outlook then also provides an opportunity to address the disproportionate responsibilities for the climate crisis of certain actors, and advocates for refugee rights and a right to stay safely in your home.

4.4 Democracy

4.4.1 The good, the bad and the ugly

Examining the notion of democracy more closely, it is difficult to address the climate crisis without also addressing the crisis that European democracies currently find themselves in, not least because right-wing parties also tend to slow down or outright reject effective climate action. This democratic crisis is in no small part due to socio-economic inequalities breeding resentment, but also due to an increasing fragmentation of public space, algorithmic echo chambers, and a decline in trust in institutions and media.[78] All this contributes to increasing polarisation and rising support for right-wing parties. It is thus of crucial importance to recreate trust in democratic processes. Environmental action, which is concerned with the fundamentally political question of how space can be inhabited collectively, can serve to favour this ideal.[79] However, the topic of democracy must be addressed, not only because of the harmful discourses stemming from right-wing parties, but also because the lack of effective climate action can, in many cases, be seen as a denial of democratic dialogue in and of itself.

"The topic of democracy must be addressed, not only because of the harmful discourses stemming from right-wing parties, but also because the lack of effective climate action can, in many cases, be seen as a denial of democratic dialogue in and of itself."

In a recent French example, a coalition of scientists, local committees and environmental interest groups mobilised against the construction of a highway between Toulouse and Castres. The A69 project was strongly criticised in an open letter signed by more than 1,500 scientists, among them several co-authors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, who called for its abandonment.[80] In spite of opinion polls stating that 61% of the local population were against the construction of the highway and 82% were in favour of a referendum on the matter,[81] protests against the highway were met with a strong police presence and escalated into violent clashes between police and activists.[82] French Minister of Transport Clement Beaune stated that he did not wish a country in which a "minority, even with valid arguments, would impose its laws [on] the elected majority".[83] The example strongly demonstrates how narratives are being used, even by people in high-ranking governmental positions, in which climate activists are presented as members of an anti-democratic minority who try to impose their will on the majority. These types of narratives must be counteracted and both the absence of concrete climate action, in spite of high levels of public support in favour of it, and the increasing criminalisation of climate-concerned citizens must be regarded as testimony to a democratic deficit.

While this example serves, in part, as a cautionary tale, it is also proof of the fact that citizens are gravely concerned with the environmental crisis. The climate movement as a whole demonstrates that, within individual countries and across national borders, actors within civil society are motivated to participate in democratic processes and are oftentimes able to successfully challenge ecologically destructive decision-making in a coordinated way.[84] This democratic potential can and should be tapped into, for example, through making use of citizen's assemblies (such as the one held in Ireland in 2018[85]) or "out of the townhall" approaches, which engage local communities to get active outside of institutional spaces. There are a number of encouraging examples that show how public space has been converted from spaces of consumption back into spaces of community, which strengthen social cohesion and work against fragmentation. One example is the urban gardens of Poblenou in Barcelona; these are community gardens initiated by the autonomous assembly of the neighbourhood. Because much of the soil has been contaminated, the gardens are not maintained for productive purposes, but are instead used as a space for social encounter and knowledge sharing on planting and working with the earth on a communitarian basis. As such, they reinforce social cohesion by allowing for a diverse group of citizens to come together.[86]

These kinds of initiatives can also be enhanced by making use of digital tools, which can make it easier for citizens to connect with each other and facilitate bottom-up initiatives. Again in Barcelona, the digital platform Decidim has been put in place through which citizens can submit policy proposals and follow the selection process.[87] Thanks to this, the city has been able to bring back economic assets through public procurement and the promotion of cooperative business models. In Germany, inhabitants of the Wuppertal "climate quarter" neighbourhood Arrenberg have created an app, which allows them to connect to each other and to present projects and announce events.[88]

4.4.2 Strengthening workplace democracy

Another crucial aspect of democracy and the just transition is workplace democracy. According to a just transition assessment by the World Benchmarking Alliance, only 4% of companies advocate for just transition policies and regulations;[89] the majority of polluting companies exclude workers and communities affected by their activities from their decision-making processes. However, if done in a socially just way, the transition can strengthen and develop existing structures of participation, which will ensure that workers can voice their concerns and influence decisions that affect them in their working lives. This includes working conditions, working time, health and safety, as well as the future development of the company and how it moves towards a socially and environmentally sustainable enterprise. A positive example to strengthen this point can be seen in the Danish wind industry, which delivered 55% of national electricity consumption in 2022, not least thanks to social dialogue that started in the 1970s and was highly influenced by unions.[90] Another example would be the Spanish workers' cooperative *Mondragón*, which is built on three institutional bases: (1) an educational system; (2) a cultural association, linking the education system with the community, including environmental issues; and (3) a credit union, the board of directors of which consists of Mondragón staff and members of the cooperatives it serves.[91]

4.4.3 Self-effectiveness and local engagement

When the environmental crisis is portrayed exclusively as a global crisis, this implies, above all, that there is a need for globally coordinated action. While this is certainly true, a narrative that centres on the big story risks reducing the perceived self-effectiveness of citizens, which might, in turn, cause them to disengage from democratic processes.[92] Instead, it should be stressed that people in smaller communities can unite more quickly and achieve tangible results. Reference can be made, for example, to energy communities, which can provide local and clean energy to citizens, lowering their energy bills at the same time as they are reducing dependency on authoritarian suppliers of fossil fuels. In 2022, the energy prices of commercial energy suppliers in Belgium were consistently more volatile and expensive than those of the Belgian energy cooperative Ecopower.[93] Moreover, energy communities are also effective at combatting socio-economic injustices and issues such as energy poverty. A case study on the social impacts of energy communities in Greece demonstrated that the profits generated by the communities tended to stay within them and were redistributed to the members, who could, in turn, reinvest them in new projects.[94] This also demonstrates how ecological impact, socio-economic justice, and immediate benefits for people and geopolitical stakes can be combined.

Furthermore, local energy production can boost democracy by promoting energy as a common good to which everyone should have access, and through giving citizens a central role in the energy transition by putting them in control of their needs. This contributes to the social acceptance of renewable energy and the ecological transition in general. According to a YouGov poll, there is strong support for citizens' involvement in renewable-energy projects, proving that people become more supportive of renewable energy in their communities when they are directly exposed to it.[95] Similarly, in an encouraging Polish case, the energy community Sunny Serock was launched by 30 citizens in 2021 and had more than 60 members by January 2023.

The project supported by the municipality has launched a 450-kW solar park on the site of a former landfill. If the Polish legal framework changes and cooperatives are allowed to generate revenues from the energy they are feeding into the grid, energy communities like Sunny Serock will soon not only aid the transition to renewables, but also become financially sustainable.[96] This leads to the conclusion that an enabling framework for the setup of energy communities across the EU can accelerate their development, and thus, contribute to advancing a socially just transition.

CONCLUSION

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Speaking about a just transition also means speaking about a change towards a more sustainable society – not just by transitioning away from fossil fuels, but by transforming society as a whole. This can start with an understanding of our own immediate vulnerability in facing climate and environmental breakdown. Humans, as part of their environment, are vulnerable to its breakdown and negatively affected not only by climate change, but by all kinds of environmental pollution and degradation. By implication, considerable health benefits can be expected from a society that takes care of its natural environment. Such a society will not only be healthier, but – if done right – more just. To holistically address the climate and environmental crisis and steer clear of false solutions, intersecting inequalities and discrimination in Europe and globally must be addressed, because these factors are not only detrimental to the social climate, but also contribute to fuelling the climate crisis. Socio-economic inequalities lead to people being pushed into unsustainable behaviour patterns; racial inequalities facilitate environmental racism locally and enable extractivism and colonial continuities globally; territorial injustices lead to an increasing urban-rural divide and separate populations from the land that sustains them; gender inequalities and certain conceptions of gender lead to unsustainable consumption patterns, but also to the undervaluing of essential care work oftentimes associated with women. All these factors contribute to the environmental crisis the world is currently experiencing and are already being addressed through a large array of local initiatives across the EU, oftentimes bottom-up civil society initiatives that benefit people and the planet. This should be encouraged by policy-making institutions through a progressive fiscal policy, redistributing wealth from the wealthy and often more polluting towards the implementation of nature- and community-based solutions to reform societies. The narrative focus should be on creating a desirable future for all. In this vision of a more equal society, urban spaces can be revalued by rewilding them and by overcoming the emotional divide between nature and culture. Cities can become biodiversity havens, rendering them, at the same time, more immediately liveable for local populations, giving space back to people and lowering their environment's carbon footprint. This can happen thanks to a variety of initiatives and measures, ranging from community-gardening initiatives to free public transport. Similarly, rural spaces can be revalued, thanks to an increased awareness that these spaces sustain life everywhere. Boosting European cultural diversity and reviving folk culture can also bring benefits. At the same time, these bottom-up initiatives further democratic engagement by giving citizens a renewed sense of ownership of the space they inhabit and the decision-making power they have.

There are countless initiatives already being put in place which demonstrate that, as individual puzzle pieces, climate action and a good life for all are possible and achievable. These initiatives are certain to multiply if policymakers facilitate their creation and if citizens overcome the sense of learned helplessness and impending doom and begin to see their role as actors in the transition. All the narrative elements for a people-centred just transition already exist; the story just needs to be told.

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Inanna Tribukait is an independent researcher and recent graduate in intercultural French and German studies from the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen and the Aix-Marseille University. She further holds a Joint Honours Degree in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Glasgow. Recently, she has been working with FEPS on narrative building efforts around the just transition. Other than that, her research focuses on socio-ecological movements and territorial justice in the French and German context, but she has also extensively researched post- and decolonial theory, as well as its links with ecological philosophy. Furthermore, she has contributed to a variety of journalistic publications within Germany and the United Kingdom.

KEVIN LE MERLE

Kevin Le Merle is a researcher and policy analyst on questions of climate, environmental, and energy justice. As a PhD Fellow, Kevin Le Merle is attached to the Department of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University and United Nations University Institute of Comparative Regional Integration Studies, where he is carrying out his research on global distributive justice principles and applying these to the external impacts of the European Green Deal. Before joining Ghent University, Kevin worked as policy analyst for the Foundation for European Progressive Studies where he spearheaded research on Climate, Environment, and Energy Policy. His past experiences also include collaborations with the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, and United Nations University, where he authored research on the EU's climate legislation with the aim to bridge the gap between global climate justice and pragmatic policy practice.

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ABOUT SOLIDAR:

SOLIDAR is a European network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) with a global reach working to advance social justice through a just transition in Europe and worldwide. Our over 50 member organisations are based in 24 countries (19 of which are EU countries) and include national CSOs in Europe and abroad. Our greater family also entails partner organisations active at the international level as well as local organisations spread across more than 40 countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. SOLIDAR represents and amplifies the voices and demands of its members and partners at the European and international level. SOLIDAR organises its work for lifelong and life-wide learning through the SOLIDAR Foundation for progressive education and citizenry participation. The network is brought together by its shared values of solidarity, equality and participation, and its mission that we achieve more together in solidarity. SOLIDAR voices the concerns of its member organisations and partners to the EU and international institutions across three main policy areas: social affairs, international cooperation, and lifelong learning.

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This policy study develops the basis for a convincing narrative on the just transition. We first identify some of the obstacles that currently stand in the way of effective climate communication, making specific mention of some ideas about climate psychology, and analyse a number of narratives that actively jeopardise climate action. These include denialist, delayerist and narratives of doom. Following that, we provide an example of how a different, justice-based narrative can be created, based on concrete examples of effective climate action across communities in the EU. Finally, we give recommendations that can be used to adopt and deliver positive climate narratives more broadly.

We recommend a focus on social justice when thinking about climate action, so it accounts for socio-economic disparities, racism, and gender inequalities. Ignoring these aspects can lead to socially unjust outcomes, such as "renovictions" and green gentrification.

It is crucial to develop narratives that highlight the immediate impacts of the climate crisis on everyday life, linking these effects to broader social injustices. This approach helps to create more relatable and urgent narratives, countering the trend of viewing climate action as beneficial only in the long term.

Showcasing successful climate actions that also address social issues can reduce feelings of helplessness and motivate democratic engagement. It is important to emphasize the mutual benefits of these actions, such as improvements in quality of life, which can transcend political divides and appeal directly to individual and community interests.

In terms of policy communication, it is essential to articulate the co-benefits of climate action, addressing immediate and long-term interests of affected populations. This includes presenting climate action as an enhancement to public health, economic stability, and social well-being, while offering concrete examples of sustainable practices and their benefits to demystify and garner support for climate policies.

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