

THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AS CATALYST FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE IN CITIES

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While the European Union (EU) has some of the world's most robust institutions for ensuring the welfare of its citizens, the launch of the European Green Deal (EGD) is an acknowledgment that emerging vulnerabilities from climate change require new approaches to maintaining societal wellbeing. This shifts the EU toward alignment with standardised global goals for keeping planetary warming from exceeding 2°C relative to pre-industrial levels and toward rethinking the European mode of ensuring safe and healthy ways of life for its residents. On the surface, the EGD is largely an economic programme rooted in efforts to shift industry toward a low-carbon economy. However, looking deeper, it points toward a desired transition: does it indicate a possible evolution toward a European welfare state that takes into account climate justice?

The EGD encourages countries to rethink entrenched norms around economic growth with, it is hoped, positive repercussions for social and environmental outcomes. This push toward a green economy has been met with some cynicism (Varoufakis & Adler, 2020), given that analogous efforts to develop a similar agenda at the intersection of economy, environment and society (e.g. sustainability, climate mitigation/adaptation and resilience initiatives) have had mixed results when the essential metrics are considered. Overall greenhouse gas emissions have steadily declined since 1990 within the EU, though some sectors have shown a continual rise (EEA, 2020) and global warming has kept increasing. Meanwhile, in the EU and globally, social inequality has worsened in the time these programmes have been in operation, a trend that has been especially acute in cities (Musterd et al., 2017; Forster et al., 2017).

It is in this context of decades of high-profile initiatives resulting in more or less continual economic growth, a mixed record of environmental improvements and a clear worsening of social inequality that the EGD has emerged. One logical conclusion (especially among cynics): if the EGD is more of the same, it will produce the same outcomes. In this paper, I argue that such a fate can be avoided and that the political foundation for doing so has already been constructed through efforts including the Just Transition Mechanism and the EU Climate Pact (see García in this volume).

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Still, in order for the EGD to be a catalyst for transition toward a European mode of ensuring climate justice, a continued and deeper internalisation of the critique of prior efforts is needed. I propose three principles that should not only be present, but should be “first and foremost” in the implementation process. These include a commitment to tend *first and foremost* (but not solely) to (1) combined social and ecological goals; (2) the most vulnerable members of society; and (3) the variety of local conditions in cities. If strategies for developing a green economy in the EU adhere to these principles in a first and foremost fashion, opportunities for different outcomes to the past may arise.

In the sections that follow, I develop my reasoning for each of the three proposed principles. In support of the first principle, I make the institutional context of urban development explicit. I describe how this context generates a demand for attending to combined social and ecological goals first and foremost, in other words, *before* addressing economic goals. I also describe how failure to adhere to this first principle fuels spatial dynamics in cities that shift aggregate risk toward areas inhabited by the most vulnerable populations. This process of urban risk-shift leads to the need for the second and third principles. In support of the second principle, I describe what it means in the European context to first and foremost meet the needs of vulnerable members of society. I argue that knowledge of the local “riskscapes” experienced by these individuals offers a clear picture of the priorities that need to be addressed through local implementation of the EGD. In support of the third principle, I argue that, while there must be EU-level frameworks for action and some of these frameworks extend beyond the realm of cities, engagement with and through cities is the most effective way to connect the larger goals of the EGD with plans that adhere to the first and second principles above. I conclude by summarising my argument for why following these principles can make the EGD a catalyst for transition toward an EU that makes climate justice an essential part of ensuring health and wellbeing.

I. Principle 1: Combined social and ecological goals

One way to describe the EGD is as the latest in a series of efforts to work from different angles to achieve the fundamental sustainability goal of balancing economic growth with environmental preservation and social equity. This goal was crafted roughly 40 years ago as a policy agenda based on an increased understanding since the 1970s of the extent to which ecosystems are groaning under the pressure of unrestrained growth and social inequality is widening to troubling levels. That the EGD shares this fundamental goal with prior sustainability, climate and resilience agendas is not reflective of a lack of originality on the part of its framers, but rather acknowledges the circumstances we face. The EGD is needed because the underlying problem first expressed in sustainability agendas over 40 years ago remains stubbornly entrenched, despite having been attacked from various angles.

The problem is that an imbalance exists in the institutional support for economic growth, environmental preservation and social equity. Put simply, the institutional weight given to economic growth crowds out other agendas. Critical sustainability scholarship argues that this results

in a systemic capitulation to growth interests at the expense of efforts to address social and environmental goals (Martinez-Alier & Meynen, 2019). Figure 1 visualises this institutional problem relative to the outcomes we have seen over the past 40 years: the economy has grown, environmental preservation has had some mixed success and social equity lags behind. The result is continued imbalance in the institutional support for each of these areas.

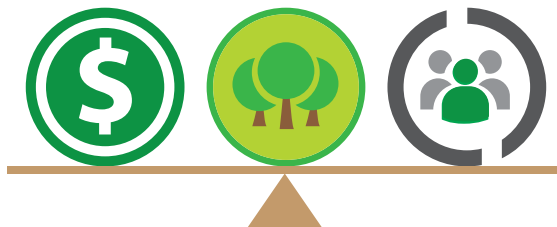
Figure 1. The European Green Deal seeks to rebalance the institutional lopsidedness in economic, environmental and equity-related initiatives present for over 40 years.



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The solution to this problem of institutional imbalance has generally been to seek balance by giving all three institutional goals separate and equal weight. As an idea it is appealing, but it has serious limitations. When we look at the results on the ground as expressed in the increasingly common green urban planning orthodoxy (Connolly, 2019), we find that any move to vaguely integrate environment or equity with economic development is considered a win. The problem here is that the lopsided institutional context of urban development generates unintended consequences. Urban greening goals that seem laudable to begin with sometimes generate undesirable effects felt most acutely by vulnerable social groups. For example, urban greening sometimes displaces low-income populations (Anguelovski et al., 2018); compact eco-cities can support high consumption and exclusionary lifestyles (Frantzeskaki et al., 2019); and climate resilience measures at times exacerbate injustices by increasing long-run hazards for marginalised populations (Keenan et al., 2018).

Figure 2. When the fundamental goal is expressed as a desire to vaguely balance economy, environment and equity in separate but equal fashion, the lopsided institutional structure leads to initiatives that often deal with one but not another goal and, in doing so, generate unintended consequences that undermine sustainability initiatives.



More concretely, in the case of New Orleans (USA), a set of green interventions that reduced flood risk resulted in the widescale displacement

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of vulnerable populations to still riskier locations (Peck, 2006). In German and Polish cities, recent low-carbon retrofits generated rent spikes that meant only higher-income populations could access more environmentally sustainable housing (Bouzarovski et al., 2018; Grossman & Huning, 2015). Such cases expose a complex process wherein social vulnerability and climate risks become wrapped up in a process of generating secure zones for well-resourced people and forcing vulnerable populations to accept life in areas with higher levels of risk. As a result, vulnerable populations experience efforts to shift towards a green society less as vehicles for transitioning to a secure development path and more as means for projecting historical biases onto future growth. To the extent that these biases favour the least vulnerable residents, spatial injustices remain stubbornly embedded in spite of goals meant to achieve the opposite (Connolly, 2018).

The response to this scenario from those seeking a green policy that will not collapse under the weight of its own unintended consequences has to be the broad pursuit of green justice and of climate justice more specifically. A key element of green and climate justice is that it brings together social and environmental goals into combined initiatives – from this angle, the two are inseparable. In other words, green justice programmes diverge from the abstract goal of separate and equal balance across economic, environmental and equity goals in order to engage with the problem of institutional imbalance. The Just Transition Mechanism, which has been attached to the EGD, is a step in this direction, though it largely focuses on accommodating the extra needs of regions with a heavy reliance on fossil-fuel intensive industries for employment. This is a narrow slice of the green justice effort.

Broadly, green justice policy involves devising initiatives that combine the political weight of social and environmental agendas. That combined weight is then leveraged to build institutional support for somewhat reducing the weight given to economic growth goals in the context of greening initiatives. The goal here is not an abstract notion of separate and equal balance, but rather a conscious effort to reset the scale. The importance of a green justice approach is highlighted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. As the EU seeks a “green recovery” from the economic decline associated with the pandemic, concentrated negative physical and mental health effects suffered by vulnerable populations from the virus and lockdown conditions highlight the need to consider social and ecological goals as fully integrated. This approach is visualised in Figure 3.

Figure 3. When social and ecological goals are combined within a green justice framework, the resulting enhanced political weight can be leveraged to generate a new institutional position for economic development agendas.



II. Principle 2: Start with the most vulnerable members of society

If the programmes designed to generate a transition to a green economy first meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of society, the result is necessarily a combined social and ecological agenda. In order to address the first principle, the EGD (or at least the Just Transition Mechanism) should be conceived in this way. This does not mean placing economic development strategies in service to greening goals, but rather to combined green justice goals. It is important to note that the intention is not to limit benefits solely to the most vulnerable members of society. Rather, tending first and foremost to their needs is simply a way of ensuring that they do not continue to be left out of the benefits. Hence, Principle 1 and Principle 2 reinforce one another as essential components of the effort to generate a different institutional pathway for the EGD to the sustainability, resilience and climate programmes that came before it.

Housing status, income, gender, ethnicity and nationality are some (though not all) of the characteristics that define the most vulnerable groups in European cities (Ranci et al., 2014; McLaren, 2003). Housing vulnerability relates to sudden and large decreases in affordability in areas where low-income populations were able to achieve a decent quality of life in the past but have been priced out. Income vulnerability in the European context is mostly associated with episodic job insecurity and income instability. Gender issues relate to a wide array of conditions such as the support available for women to enter the workforce (e.g. affordable child-care), and historically (often unacknowledged) high levels of violence and bias against women in professional and home settings. Gender issues also extend to a mixed set of challenges faced by those who identify as other than male or female and connect with a correlated set of issues around sexual identity. Vulnerabilities derived from ethnicity and nationality stem from the increasingly virulent backlash against (legal and illegal) migrants in numerous settings across the EU expressed in political hostility and exclusion. This issue is expected to become more acute as climate-related migration puts additional pressure on wealthy countries.

These categories of social vulnerability provide a lens through which to view the “riskscapes” for European residents. A riskscape is the full set of risks (e.g. relating to climate, health, housing or economic insecurity) perceived to be present within a given territorial boundary. For example, someone living in a low-lying coastal area with high dependence on a few heavy industries for employment may have an acute feeling of the risk of sea-level rise, the risk of loss of economic opportunity if industries are forced to relocate, and health risks related to industrial activities. The full set of risks associated with the particular geography in which someone lives makes up their riskscape. To the extent that the riskscapes of socially vulnerable groups differ systematically from those of less vulnerable groups, the ability to advance climate justice (or not) depends greatly on understanding this difference. In practice, an EGD that targets first and foremost interventions that address the elements of riskscapes that are unique to socially vulnerable people would seek to alleviate issues like the energy divide, green gentrification, job precarity and climate vulnerability, to name a few. In this way, geography becomes the vehicle for the development of a combined social and ecological agenda that guides policy toward climate justice *and* toward meeting broad climate goals at the same time.

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An EGD that serves as a catalyst for climate justice would first and foremost address the riskscape of the most vulnerable members of society, rather than blindly grabbing any greener production shift that seems feasible. It would be based on an environmental agenda constructed around the greatest need according to a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the most socially vulnerable (relative to others). This approach is different to what has been done in the past. It does not start by asking those who are arguably the least vulnerable in society what green additions can be added to their economic growth agenda in the vague hope that both environmental and social benefits will result. We have already seen the impacts of that approach – greater social inequality and a selective environmental preservation that continues to be associated with worsening global climate change.

III. Principle 3: Work with and through cities

It has long been acknowledged that cities are the best platform for addressing the institutional challenges associated with meeting global climate goals. When the global sustainability movement turned towards urban planning as a tool for shaping actions at the local level, it was fully embraced. By the 1990s, urban planning was practically synonymous with sustainability. Later, local sustainability efforts were augmented with climate mitigation and adaptation, resilience, and “smart” planning initiatives in cities. All of this accumulated activity means that there is a strong and established platform for translating global, regional and state-level climate action agendas into urban-scale interventions. To not employ the EGD – and especially the Just Transition Mechanism – with and through cities would be to waste this valuable resource.

Further, moving toward the city scale is essential for the EGD in particular for two reasons. First, the city-level is where riskscape take shape and thus where we can best understand what a combined social and ecological intervention should look like. For example, the city of Barcelona has recently embarked on a pilot programme for creating climate refuges that address the intersection of changing environmental conditions (e.g. increased heat and flooding) and multiple social vulnerabilities based on the gender, housing insecurity, income and ethnicity of residents in targeted neighbourhoods. It seeks to ground climate initiatives in the act of alleviating neighbourhood risks experienced by vulnerable residents. This programme is a small-scale pilot, but it points toward what can be leveraged by working with and through cities to develop a combined social and ecological agenda for the EGD. Barcelona City Council has partnered with a local coalition of social equity and ecological preservation interests that have nuanced understandings of the local conditions. A multiplicity of such partnerships would generate diverse and impactful responses to climate and social risks in European cities.

The second reason the city scale is essential for the EGD is that goals developed at the global, regional or state level cannot account for unintended consequences that arise as a result of local conditions. For example, California (USA) has embarked on an aggressive climate programme seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a similar extent to Europe. As part of this programme, it passed the Sustainable Communities and

Climate Protection Act of 2008, which mandated urban regions create land use plans that would result in lowered emissions. The state defined emission reduction targets and regions planned for the reduction. In the city of San Francisco, this meant that certain areas with transit access were targeted for new high-density development. Some of these areas had long been lower-income communities where mostly non-white people lived. However, the plans launched under these new climate initiatives to radically alter these communities rapidly increased the risk of displacement among vulnerable residents. Climate policy and real estate markets provide an example of localised feedback that can only be addressed in partnership with city-scale organisations.

The third principle proposed for catalysing climate justice through the EGD should be the easiest to accomplish, as there is an established and well-supported basis for city-level climate actions. In fact, this principle has already begun to be mobilised within the implementation of the EGD. The European Climate Pact clearly embeds a role for cities and urban grassroots groups in the EGD by establishing the centrality of connecting local communities and civil society with larger-scale industrial and regional interventions. The goals of the Climate Pact include ensuring a participatory and open approach that engages local organisations, which retains a central role for cities in the EGD. This third principle pushes the EGD to ensure that once frameworks have been adopted at the EU level, applications are adapted at the local level to account for the variety of feedbacks generated.

Conclusion

The three principles presented in this paper are designed to articulate a direction for the EGD that departs from prior analogous efforts in order to become a catalyst for climate justice, especially in cities. Prior sustainability, climate and resilience initiatives have reinforced institutional support for increased social inequality and have a mixed record of environmental improvements. Within these policy programmes, urbanisation processes tend to generate uneven riskscapes in which the neighbourhoods of vulnerable residents become sinks for society's emerging threats to wellbeing. Thus far, the EGD shows promising signs of having the capacity to internalise lessons from past endeavours. The Just Transition Mechanism and the Climate Pact are sister programmes that develop resources and reasoning for heading in the direction implied by the principles proposed here. However, the risk is that when it is rolled out, the agendas that push the EGD toward climate justice will become more and more marginalised. I argue for exactly the opposite. The principles described here should come first and foremost in order to ensure that the outcomes of prior programmes are not repeated.

Most importantly, the EGD needs to embrace and build on its historical position. It should seek to implement plans developed with and through cities to address the combined social and ecological risks of the most vulnerable EU residents, allowing the EGD to loop its activities into people's lives. Fundamentally, such an approach is a simple acknowledgment that the best way to leave no one behind in a green transition is to begin by tending to the needs of those who are most commonly neglected.

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