

## **Just transition and welfare states: a largely unexplored relation**

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The challenge of climate change has been on the agenda since at least the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, with both ups (Kyoto Protocol in 1997) and downs (COP15 in 2009) in the last decades. Nevertheless, since the COP21 Paris Accord in 2015, the climate emergency has been recognised as a top policy priority by more and more policymakers around the globe while the various restructuring processes it entails have been seen as the main challenge of the coming decades. Concerning the social side, discussions have focused on the issue of inequality and the need for a just transition.

By reframing the sustainability trilemma, between fiscal, social and environmental objectives, for the case of the climate emergency and deconstructing the concept of just transition, some of the concept's inherent contradictions have been highlighted. Galgóczi (2022) argued that, to address the complexity of inequalities within the climate-environment-social nexus and move from fragmented 'just transition for us' policies to a 'just transition for all' approach, the role of the welfare state needs to be addressed.

Gough already argued more than a decade ago that the welfare state that emerged in the context of a fossil fuel-based extractive economic model, based on a belief in sustained growth, cannot remain unaffected by the ongoing transition to a net zero economy (Gough et al., 2008). Even so, the different possible linkages between the welfare state and climate and environmental issues remain largely unexplored.

A growing but limited number of studies have addressed the different dimensions (social insurance, social assistance, health and safety, and so on) of the welfare state (Koch et al., 2016), mainly at European level, although otherwise almost nothing has been developed at international level. Most of them have certainly not involved sophisticated quantitative measurements. While for the moment there is still relatively little literature on the topic – 'sustainable welfare' being one important narrative (Büchs and Koch, 2017) – there is a growing academic community emerging among welfare state specialists who are interested in environmental issues. At the same time, however, the social dimension of the socio-ecological nexus is overlooked by those who are environmental scholars.

Many open questions remain and until very recently discussion of social welfare systems in Europe has been disconnected from ecological concerns and policies. The relevant objectives, instruments and actors were largely different. Environmental and climate science, on the one hand, and the analysis and theoretical foundations of welfare systems on the other, emerged and developed in isolated silos. The same can

be said about concepts of environmental and climate justice versus approaches based on social justice, labour law and industrial relations. This has resulted in very different concepts of how the necessary change of the production regime to a zero-carbon economy can proceed in an equitable and just way. The concept of just transition emerged in the early 1980s and it has many different interpretations (driven largely by actors' interests). The just transition narrative has, however, been mostly disconnected from debates about the welfare state while both assume continuing economic growth (even if, in the case of the former, on green growth). As a result, the different possible linkages between the welfare state and climate and environmental issues remain largely unexplored. This has the consequence that there is only a narrative at metalevel (just transition) but that this is too vague to be able to answer specific questions on the contours of a welfare state that is compatible with ecological issues.

In short, while climate, welfare and labour issues emerge as key policy challenges for the coming decades, climate ambition does not seem to correlate with welfare ambition and the comparable approaches of different schools of thought do not seem to be very promising so far. This paper aims to present a broad mapping of the current debates mainly at EU level, highlighting possible alternative directions (from green growth to sustainable welfare; from technology to behavioural changes). It proceeds through selected literature reviews offering a dialogue between different perspectives and opening successive routes of questioning. It also highlights the current limitations in the analysis of the role and the shape of welfare states in tackling environmental challenges and labour market transitions. It also suggests other avenues to be explored.

In the paper we first discuss the concept of the welfare state, then present a short summary of the key challenges and various scenarios. In Section 3 we reflect on the concept of just transition and what it means for the labour process while Section 4 looks at the rapidly changing European policy context. The fifth section focuses on the question of growth and addresses some of the challenges identified in the previous sections.