

## 4. A Greener and more Social Pillar<sup>1</sup>

Maria Petmesidou and Ana M. Guillén

---

As the Social Summit looms, a step change in social and environmental rights is needed to realise the EU's just-transition goal.

The European Green Deal<sup>2</sup> (EGD) assigns a pivotal role to the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), in guiding the transition to inclusive environmental sustainability. This nexus is much touted too in the Action Plan<sup>3</sup> for the implementation of the EPSR, recently presented by the European Commission. The 20 principles of the EPSR<sup>4</sup> are held to be the beacon towards 'a transition to climate-neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change that is socially fair and just', ensuring that the EGD and the 2030 Digital Decade are beneficial to all Europeans.

These are very ambitious and demanding goals. But the narrow approach to 'just transition'<sup>5</sup> underlying the green and digital agendas of the EU, as well as significant gaps in the EPSR—let alone its non-binding character<sup>6</sup>—raise important questions as to their realisation.

The current conjuncture is opportune to reflect on barriers to, and enablers of, such an inclusive transition. Particularly so as the pandemic underscores the urgency of simultaneous efforts to address the environmental crisis and its unequal distributional impacts, while high expectations for the EU's commitment to social rights<sup>7</sup> attach to the Social Summit in Porto in May.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper first appeared on the website of Social Europe ([www.socialeurope.eu](http://www.socialeurope.eu)) on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 under the title "A Greener and more social pillar." And is reproduced for this conference with thanks to the authors and Robin Wilson, the editor of Social Europe

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en)

<sup>5</sup> <https://socialeurope.eu/focus/just-transition>

<sup>6</sup> <https://socialeurope.eu/eu-credibility-as-a-peoples-union-rests-on-the-social-pillar>

<sup>7</sup> <https://socialeurope.eu/european-social-rights>

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_21\\_101](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_101)

## Squaring the circle

The intensity and pace of change in the economy and society under the triple transition—green, digital and demographic—all accelerated by the pandemic, are of an unprecedented scale. An approach to ‘justice’ and ‘fairness’ which narrowly targeted groups or regions expected to be severely hit by the combined effect of the technological advances and the decarbonising of the economy could hardly square the circle of meeting the environmental challenges while ensuring social equity and wellbeing.

Such a limited view of the social impacts of climate change and associated policies is however evident in the commission’s communication<sup>9</sup> of December 2019 on the EGD. This makes no reference to inequality and the main social-policy tools on which it focuses are ‘pro-active re-skilling and upskilling’, deemed ‘necessary to reap the benefits of the ecological transition’.

As important as it to engage with the implications in terms of employment and vocational education and training for the social groups most severely hit by the green and digital transitions, if this transformation is not set within a comprehensive approach to the wide-ranging distributional impacts on social groups, regions and localities, it cannot suffice to meet the EU’s pledge of ‘leaving no one behind’.

That requires a step change towards an integrated approach, critical of the impact of existing social and economic structures and relations on the environmental crisis. It calls for actions which simultaneously address a broad range of socio-economic inequalities and climate adaptation/mitigation.

A constrained just-transition approach, relying on a combination of social safety-nets and vocational education and (re)training policies for specific groups of workers most affected, would risk being another failed blueprint. Recall how the notion of ‘flexicurity’, connoting a benign combination of flexibility and security in the labour market, entailed in practice a troublesome relationship between the deregulation of labour and social policy in the pursuit of competitiveness and profit maximisation.

## Legally enforceable

A legally enforceable social rulebook which guarantees the right to a healthy environment is crucial for an inclusive transition. When the EPSR was

---

<sup>9</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/communication-european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/communication-european-green-deal_en)

proclaimed by EU leaders in November 2017 there was no explicit concern<sup>10</sup> about the two-way relationship between social inequality and environmental challenges. The direct or indirect implications for the effective enjoyment of social rights deriving from adverse effects of climate change and climate-change policies, and how these implications can be averted, are crucial issues. But they were not at the forefront of EU-level political considerations.

The recently published Action Plan aspires to address this lacuna, as its ambitious subtitle ('A Strong Social Europe for just transitions and recovery') denotes. But a careful reading shows that expectations for a reinforced pillar vis-à-vis the environmental challenges are hardly met.

Neither are there any signs of a roadmap to becoming a legally-binding instrument in the future. Obviously, such a development would have potentially powerful effects on the political context of EU integration and the realisation of a social Europe.

The Action Plan is rather a revamped version of the EU 2020 Agenda<sup>11</sup>. It resets, for 2030, two targets of the agenda of the previous decade, on employment and poverty reduction, which were not achieved—most blatantly the poverty target—and adds a third, aiming to empower lifelong learning. The EPSR's loose programmatic status is also reflected in the very narrow scope of new legislative initiatives<sup>12</sup> under the Action Plan.

A crucial step in addressing the just-transition challenge would be to set at the core of the EPSR a broadly defined right to protection of health, underscoring the right to a healthy environment. Such a broad definition of health protection is already inscribed in the European Social Charter<sup>13</sup> of the Council of Europe. It highlights the strong interactions between the environmental challenges, health and wellbeing. The pandemic has brought into sharp relief the risks faced by ignoring these interlinkages.

The right to a healthy environment is essential to ensure adequate living and working conditions which promote the enjoyment of health by all—not only pertaining to the workplace, as is the case now with the pillar. Moreover,

---

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322037361\\_Towards\\_a\\_European\\_Pillar\\_of\\_Social\\_Rights\\_from\\_a\\_preliminary\\_outline\\_to\\_a\\_Commission\\_Recommendation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322037361_Towards_a_European_Pillar_of_Social_Rights_from_a_preliminary_outline_to_a_Commission_Recommendation)

<sup>11</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://socialeurope.eu/social-pillar-action-plan-longer-on-aspiration>

<sup>13</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/icon/article/7/3/529/703201>

expanding the right to health to include appropriate environmental conditions for the realisation of most other essential rights (such as to food, housing and work) can strengthen social citizenship as a core idea of the EPSR, supportive of an inclusive transition.

## Close monitoring

In line with this, the interface<sup>14</sup> between social rights and environmental change must be closely monitored. Available Eurostat datasets and indicators—on the Sustainable Development Goals, EU 2020, the EPSR and the environment—cover a wide range of issues of social inequality and exclusion on the one hand and greenhouse-gas emissions, air pollutants, biodiversity and energy on the other. But information on the social-environmental linkages is sparse.

Data need to be systematically collected on exposure to environmental hazards by socio-professional or income group and on cumulative vulnerability and health risks across social groups due to the distribution of the burden of environmental inequality. Also required are greenhouse-gas emissions by income group (on the basis of consumption) and the distributional impacts of various environmental policies. Such data would provide a valuable compass to a genuinely just transition.

The Social Summit provides an opportunity to give political impetus to a strengthened pillar, which underlines the right to a healthy environment and brings centre-stage the nexus between social rights and environmental change. Whether it can deliver on this expectation remains to be seen.

---

<sup>14</sup> <https://socialeurope.eu/the-four-is-of-a-new-socio-ecological-contract>