



***Social Justice Ireland 34th Annual Policy Conference***  
***Social Rights for All? Time to deliver on the European Pillar of Social Rights***  
**17 November 2021**

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**The challenges of a socially “just transition”  
through the European Green Deal**

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## **Three parts of our presentation**

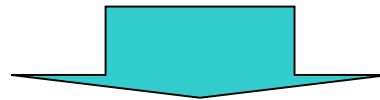
- (1) The social objectives and missing social dimensions of the European Green Deal**
- (2) The EGD's programmatic (social) goals vis-à-vis the two major strategic pronouncements of the EU (*the social investment approach and the EPSR*)**
- (3) Some reflections on critical steps towards bolstering the “just transition” goal**

# (1) THE SOCIAL OBJECTIVES OF THE EGD

## **Green Growth / Just sustainability: Compatible/Complementary (EGD, UN SDGs, ILO)**

➤ **Social justice - a crucial component of a development path relying heavily on mutually beneficial links between economics and the environment (as particularly stressed in the UN 2030 Agenda, largely drawing upon the Brundtland Report of 1987)**

**But the breadth of the “just and fair transition” notion varies (broad/narrow) in the strategic programmes of these IOs**



➤ **A broad definition** points to the need for a comprehensive approach to the distributional impact of the triple transition (green, digital and demographic) and of the mitigation/adaptation policies across populations and regions.

➤ **A narrow definition** focuses on programmes of support for workers who lost their jobs due to environmental protection policies.

# (1) THE SOCIAL OBJECTIVES OF THE EGD

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## **A controversial stance characterizes the EGD**

- **On the one hand, the minimalist and vague motto of “no one must be left behind” somehow hints at a comprehensive view of distributional issues.**
- **On the other hand, policies are framed in a narrow view, that of responding to the blow of job and income losses as a result of the decarbonization of production and consumption patterns.**

# **(1) THE SOCIAL OBJECTIVES OF THE EGD**

## **Missing dimensions**

- 1. The systemic (positive and negative) feedback loops between the three transitions –green, digital, demographic- and the pressures these exert on public budgets are not extensively factored into the EGD’s policy framework.**
- 2. The double bind in which welfare states are caught under the triple transition is hardly addressed:**
  - Social spending competes with pressures on public budgets for offsetting climate change.**
  - At the same time new forms of work, changing labour demands and demographic ageing greatly narrow the fiscal base of public budgets.**
  - These pressures are further compounded by the unprecedented accumulation of public debts during the pandemic.**

# **(1) THE SOCIAL OBJECTIVES OF THE EGD**

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## **Missing dimensions**

- 3. No reference to inequality and social rights – an indication that the EGD neglects the broader distributional effects of environmental policies.**
- 4. The narrow definition of “just transition” reveals significant protection gaps, particularly among groups furthest from the labour market (various vulnerable groups, including segments of the labour force exposed to non-standard work arrangements).**
- 5. A “gender lens” is missing (as is also the intersection between class, gender and ethnicity,) even though the existing literature demonstrates that climate change and environmental degradation and the adaptation/mitigation responses “are, indeed, gendered”.**

## 2. THE EGD's PROGRAMMATIC SOCIAL GOALS VIS-À-VIS THE SI APPROACH AND THE EPSR

**A stop-and-go (disjointed) manner is a major hallmark of how EU-level social policy has developed so far**

- **2000s, emphasis on mutual learning for “modernizing the welfare state” through a soft governance framework (the so-called OMC)**
- **2013, an ambitious turn to Social Investment– But soon a comprehensive SI approach was discontinued, and a “light” (liberal) SI version predominated**
- **2017, EPSR: A principles-based approach (reminiscent of the European Social Charter of the 1980s) without any binding force though. It further overshadowed the SI approach in its “heavy” Nordic version, and shifted emphasis to a “light” version making social protection subject to labour market inclusion**
- **2019, EGD: No reference to comprehensive SI – Invocation of the EPSR boils down to a narrowly “targeted” support to geographical areas/sectors/people hardest hit by the transition**

**No reference to environmental issues**

## **2. THE EGD's PROGRAMMATIC SOCIAL GOALS VIS-À-VIS THE SI APPROACH AND THE EPSR**

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**The 20 principles of the EPSR 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 will entail success for all Europeans.**

**But a narrow definition of “just transition” relying on a combination of social buffers and vocational education and (re)training policies for the most affected groups of workers and localities risks being yet another failed “flexicurity” blueprint that reproduces a troublesome relationship between labour deregulation and social policy.**



### **(3) SOME CRITICAL STEPS TOWARDS BOLSTERING THE “JUST TRANSITION” GOAL**

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**Disappointingly, two recent programmatic texts, the Action Plan for the Implementation of the EPSR and the 8th Environmental Action Programme (EAP) share the ambiguities of the ERD.**

- **The Action Plan’s ambitious title “A Strong Social Europe for just transition and recovery” is not matching the content.**
- **Expectations for an emboldened “Pillar” vis-à-vis the environmental crisis and inequality are hardly met.**
- **The Action Plan is rather a revamped version of the EU 2020 Agenda, leaning towards a “light” (liberal) SI perspective.**

### **(3) SOME CRITICAL STEPS TOWARDS BOLSTERING THE “JUST TRANSITION” GOAL**

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- **Namely, it resets, for 2030, two targets of the agenda of the previous decade (the employment and poverty reduction rates), which failed to be achieved (most blatantly the poverty reduction target), and adds a third one aiming to empower lifelong learning.**
- **The EPSR’s loose programmatic status is also reflected in the very narrow scope of new legislative initiatives under the Action Plan.**

**Similarly, concerns that the ambitions stipulated by the 8th EAP will not result in effective policies have been raised in the recently carried out public consultation on the Commission’s draft.**

### **(3) SOME CRITICAL STEPS TOWARDS BOLSTERING THE “JUST TRANSITION” GOAL**

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#### **First, for an inclusive transition**

- **a legally enforceable social rulebook is crucial**
- **the right to a healthy environment should be set at its core**

**This requires setting at the core of the EPSR a broadly defined right to protection of health that underscores the right to a healthy environment.**

**The right to a healthy environment is essential for ensuring adequate living and working conditions that promote the enjoyment of health for all - not only pertaining to the work place, as is the case now with the “Social Pillar”.**

### **(3) SOME CRITICAL STEPS TOWARDS BOLSTERING THE “JUST TRANSITION” GOAL**

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Importantly, expanding the **right to health** so as to include appropriate environmental conditions for the realization of most other **essential rights (to food, housing, work)**, can strengthen **social citizenship** as a core idea of the **EPSR**, supportive of **“inclusive transition”**.

Such a broad definition of health protection is already inscribed in the **European Social Charter** and signals the importance of the links between the **environmental challenges, health and wellbeing**, which the pandemic has emphatically revealed.

### **(3) SOME CRITICAL STEPS TOWARDS BOLSTERING THE “JUST TRANSITION” GOAL**

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**Second, the EU’s governance framework needs to be broadened**

➤ **Particularly important is to upgrade the social scope of the European Semester in order to closely monitor the social rights – environmental change interface**

**Third, in line with the above a robust monitoring framework is essential in steering the triple transition**

### **(3) SOME CRITICAL STEPS TOWARDS BOLSTERING THE “JUST TRANSITION” GOAL**

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**Available Eurostat data sets and indicators (e.g. on the Sustainable Development Goals, on EU2020, on the EPSR, and on environment/energy issues) cover a wide range of social inequality / social exclusion issues on the one hand, and greenhouse emissions, air pollutants, biodiversity and energy on the other.**

**But information on the social-environmental linkages is sparse.**

**Commonly agreed EU overarching indicators on environmental change, eco-social divides, labour market and demographic polarization are crucial for **broadening the EU's governance framework, building equity in its green growth goals, and achieving greater policy coherence.****

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## **To conclude:**

- **The absence of a strong social rulebook to underpin the urgent and ambitious green transition aimed at by the EGD casts serious doubts as to whether an encompassing “just transition” framework can develop.**
- **The more so as the disjointed manner (without clear priorities) characterizing the development of EU-level social policy and the predominance of “soft law” hardly favour a comprehensive approach to the wide-ranging distributional impacts.**
- **Finally, the complex challenge of aligning stakeholders at various levels (supranational, national, regional/local) weighs heavily on any critical steps towards a just, equity-focused eco-social transformation - An issue that research has barely tackled so far.**



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**THANK YOU!**