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The Ecological and Social Transition: An Approach from the Context of the European Union

Introduction: The origin of the concept “ecological and social transition”

The ecological and social transition may be considered a relatively new paradigm, but in fact, it is the result of criticism of the productivist and consumerist model that emerged in the 1970s in several industrialised countries. This is confirmed by the fact that it is a model “that in economic and social terms presents enormous imbalances, which is ethically unjust and unsustainable on a planetary scale” and that Western societies developed “a misunderstood progress” that means “a wrong equation between economic growth, technological progress and human welfare” (Woischnik, 2019a: 1).

It is since the beginning of the 2000s and as a result of increasing environmental degradation (loss of biodiversity, pollution of various kinds), increasing natural disasters and greater concern about climate change, especially by scientists, that a proper debate on the issue has started. A number of initiatives and publications, both at the national and international levels, have highlighted the social dimension associated with the environmental question. Accordingly, social aspects in conjunction with environmental and climatic aspects have come to the fore. Several examples can be made.

One is the “Commission on the Measurement of Economic Development and Social Progress”, created in 2008 by the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose most prominent members are Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen (both Nobel Prize winners) and the economist and sociologist Jean-Paul Fitoussi. The published document, entitled Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, stresses that the measurement of GDP does not reflect – among other things – environmental degradation and its negative social impacts on the health and quality of life of citizens (Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi, 2009). Ten years later, Joseph Stiglitz added: “What we measure affects what we do, and if we measure the wrong thing, we will do the wrong thing” (Stiglitz, 2018).

Another example is the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) "Green Economy" projects and documents from 2008 and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) "Green Growth" initiatives from 2009. With regard to the OECD, the promotion of green growth was initially considered the way out of the 2008 financial crisis. Yet, shortly afterwards, the OECD highlighted the importance of the social dimension too in the context of green growth (Woischnik, 2015). This and many other precedents led to the concept of the "ecological and social transition". As far as the conceptual framework is concerned, there is no single definition, i.e. different documents as well as the respective debate handle different terms: "social and ecological transition", "eco-social transition", "just ecological transition" or "just and inclusive transition". All these concepts have a common denominator, which is the need and the demand for a profound change in our economic and social model.

The origin of the term "Just Transition" provides an illustration of the link between the ecological and the social dimension of any green transition. The expression "Just Transition" is attributed to the US trade union leader Tony Mazzocchi and was later taken up by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in the context of the loss of workers' jobs due to environmental policies and the necessary financial support in the transitional phase. The ILO states that "just transition is not just another transition", but is a key issue in the process of "environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all" (ILO, 2018: 5). The link between the ecological and the social was established in both empirical and theoretical terms.

The chapter first discusses the European experience with the environmental and social transition focusing on the European Green Deal. Then it analyses problems of implementation in the European case, stressing factors such as waste disposal, energy transition issues including nuclear technology, supply and security, economic costs and the necessary resources, and the Spanish experience with implementation. Finally, analysis moves to the necessary cultural change for a successful green and social transition. The concluding remarks discuss how the European experiences can help Latin America and foster EU-LAC bi-regional cooperation.

The European perspective: The European Green Deal

With regard to Europe, the planning of an ecological and social transition was the response to the financial and economic crisis of 2008. In Germany, both the prestigious Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy and members of the political party The Greens (Die Grünen) proposed the need for a

New Social Contract. This should enshrine the link between the environment and social sustainability. The Greens, who published an extensive analysis on the subject (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2011), argued that the ecological and social transition and the Green New Deal express the same vision, similar criteria and demands with the aim of initiating a change in the economic and social model.

In this context, reflections on a Green New Deal provided an interesting analogy to the New Deal, the interventionist policy through a set of economic measures adopted by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt with the aim of alleviating the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Green New Deal proposes a cycle of green innovation characterised by direct state investment in green infrastructure, as well as the creation of a favourable framework for the growth of an environmental market for products and services. The social component of the Green New Deal is reflected in the generation of green jobs through increased spending in education and training, as the new jobs require much higher qualifications than traditional industrial production (Woischnik, 2019a: 3).

The Green New Deal was advocated in Europe and beyond. US Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and US senator Bernie Sanders (Sanders, 2021), or the former UK Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn (Hancox, 2019) supported it, demanding a profound transformation of the economy that is capable of tackling climate change and that manages to reduce economic and social inequalities. In the context of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, Yanis Varoufakis (2019), the former Greek finance minister, presented the European Spring document, an ambitious draft of radical political, economic, social and ecological proposals.

The European Union has taken on a leading role in the ecological and social transition. In December 2019, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, presented the European Green Deal. Its objective is to make Europe the first continent in the world to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, as the European Commission (2022) emphatically states on its webpage presenting its strategy and policy priorities. The necessary social and ecological as well as digital transitions can be considered the essence of the European Green Deal, which includes the energy transition and thus the decarbonisation of economies.

The European Green Pact is set against the backdrop of the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and, as a consequence, the economic recovery. In terms of financing the Green Pact, a package of 1.8 trillion euros was approved in 2020, of which just over 1 trillion euros corresponds to the new multiannual financial framework 2021–2027, while 750 billion euros are qualified as the exceptional temporary recovery instrument Next Generation EU (European

Commission, 2020). The confluence of economic, social and ecological aspects of the Green Deal is clearly manifested in the Just Transition Fund too, which aims to compensate European regions that have to cope with considerable socio-economic impacts in their transition to climate neutrality. According to José Antonio Sanahuja, director of the Carolina Foundation, the European Green Pact includes “the need to reorient the financial system and speculative capital towards the ecological transition” and “gives a central role to massive public investment” (Sanahuja, 2021).

A wide range of directives, strategies and laws support the implementation of the European Green Pact. Among the most important are the European Climate Act (2021), the Fit for 55 legislative proposals, the Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the new Energy Efficiency of Buildings Directive and the (proposed) Diligence Directive on global supply chains, which requires companies to respect human rights and the environment. – The European Climate Act and the Fit for 55 packages have as their main goal the reduction of net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990. Recent decisions include the provisional agreement on a CO₂ tax on imports of products such as iron, steel, cement, aluminium, fertilisers, electricity and hydrogen. This tariff, which would be applied gradually from October 2023, is part of the fight against climate change, but also aims to protect European industry.

A key role in the fight against climate change is played by the (first and second) Circular Economy Action Plan, an alternative to the linear economic model. In the words of Luis M. Jiménez Herrero, a Spanish expert and author of several books on the subject:

“The so-called Circular Economy has evolved from an initial vision focused on providing a solution to the problem of waste, to now emerge as an alternative backbone of a more sustainable economic model with broad implications for the transformation of lifestyles. The idea-force is to maintain products, components and materials at their highest level of usefulness and value, under the principle of not unnecessarily destroying resources” (Jiménez Herrero, 2019: 28).

In this context, the book *Cradle to Cradle* (*Cradle to Cradle* instead of *Cradle to Grave*) is a milestone. The authors, the German chemist-ecologist Michael Braungart and the US landscape architect William McDonough, are forerunners and promoters of the circular economy. The book argues that the reduction of resource consumption is more pressing than ever, precisely because of the increasing scarcity of raw materials. Once again, the link between the environmental and the social and their mutual impact is highlighted.

However, it is worth noting that the issue was addressed by scientists more than 30 years ago. For example, Ernst-Ulrich von Weizsäcker, author of several books on the consequences of climate change, was, together with Friedrich Schmidt-Bleek, the founder of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy in Germany. Both are notable for having elaborated early on the reduction of resource consumption by industrialised countries. Schmidt-Bleek proposed in the 1990s that the reduction should be achieved by a “Factor 10” (Factor X, in Roman) and in 2008 he created the Faktor 10 Institute. Von Weizsäcker later postulated that a “Factor 4” could double wealth and halve resource consumption (von Weizsäcker, Lovins & Lovins, 1997).

The European perspective: The question of implementation

One of the challenges of the Green Deal is its implementation by the 27 EU member states, as it is an extremely ambitious and far-reaching strategy. On the one hand, experience shows that some countries have great difficulties in transposing EU directives and laws into national legislation. On the other hand, despite the fact that the European Commission has a demanding Circular Economy Action Plan and some countries have advanced national legislation, some industrialised countries still export their plastic waste or e-waste to developing countries, which have neither the technical nor the financial capacity to deal adequately with this type of waste. There is no doubt that strict legislation and control by the European Union and national governments are needed to prevent such practices.

Furthermore this is an economic and ecological contradiction on the part of the industrialised countries. On the one hand, disposal of special waste in developing countries does not guarantee its proper recycling due to lack of technology and resources thus posing an ecological problem. On the other hand, the increasing scarcity of raw materials makes it unprofitable and inefficient not to recycle it in the appropriate way. Moreover, it is socially and ethically unacceptable vis-à-vis developing countries. In most cases, it is women and children who scavenge the mountains of rubbish for items which they then sell for a meagre income.

As for the energy transition – a key pillar of the social and ecological transition, one issue of conflict is the so-called green taxonomy. While the European Commission considers nuclear energy as a “bridging technology” (Brückentechnologie) related to climate change mitigation and adaptation, several countries – including Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria – are opposed to recognising nuclear energy as a transitional energy. Cristina Narbona, currently

first vice-president of the Spanish Senate and formerly an advisor to the Spanish Nuclear Safety Council, recently pointed out that “although it does not emit carbon dioxide while the plants are operating, it does so throughout its very long life cycle. And it has high production costs and dangers such as the Fukushima catastrophe” (Narbona, 2022). It was precisely in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster that Chancellor Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union party decided to withdraw Germany from nuclear energy.

In this context, it should also be mentioned that radioactive waste, deposited in permanent storage or in so-called “nuclear graveyards”, retains radiation for hundreds of years, which is irresponsible towards future generations and therefore contradicts the 1987 Brundtland Report’s definition of sustainable development, which refers to “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations” (United Nations, 1987: n.p.). The intersection between the issue of energy supply and energy security may be a crucial debate in the energy transition. Russia’s war in Ukraine powerfully shows this. Virtually all EU countries are affected and even countries on other continents are feeling the impact on their economies.

The situation in Germany exemplifies the dilemma. The problem in Germany is not only a lack of energy supply, but that politics and public debate have taken an unexpected turn from energy transition to concern about the energy crisis and thus energy security. This concern has stopped a part of the public from paying as much attention to the climate emergency. The fear of being left without heating in winter, high energy prices and the government’s substantial aid to Ukraine in terms of money and weapons are affecting social cohesion. Despite the government’s important economic measures for businesses, families, pensioners, and the vulnerable segments more broadly, the link between environmental transition and social dynamics remains a sticky point on the agenda, especially for the implementation of green policy.

The implementation of green policies is first and foremost subject to the economic resources available. Josep Borrell, the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, stresses that “the ecological and energy transition cannot be made at zero cost; it will have a cost, and it must be shared out fairly. Those who worry about the end of the month cannot be asked to worry about the end of the world” (Borrell, 2019). Indeed, green policies do not affect all people in the same way, i.e. the economic and social impact may differ: “the CO₂ price in the transport and building sectors would affect more than 1% of the net income of low-income households, while for high-income households, it would mean on average 0.4% of their net income” (Woischnik, 2019b).

The protests of the so-called “yellow waistcoats” movement in France also serve as an example. The increase in petrol prices as a consequence of President Macron’s climate policy had more economic impacts on people living in suburban, peripheral and rural areas and less on those living in the cities. The reason is that people in the outskirts and the countryside drive several kilometres every day between their home and their workplace of business. This may not be easily affordable for low-income families. Therefore, “public policies must consider ecological measures and their social impacts from the outset and in parallel. If not approached and acted upon in this way, public policies, even if they have the best intentions and commitment from an environmental and climate point of view, will be doomed to failure” (Woischnik, 2022: 22).

In this respect, Jofre Carnicer, a researcher at the University of Barcelona and one of the authors of the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), believes that the ecological transition cannot take place if the social transition is not also taken into account. He points out “that the challenge for the coming decades is ‘very complex’... and calls for engaging society through ‘deep and calm’ dialogues, with data, to gain a broadly informed perspective” (Carnicer, 2022). The report also advocates strong institutions that guarantee social protection systems that facilitate the ecological transition without leaving anyone behind.

Spain is one of the most advanced countries in the European Union in terms of social and ecological transition. The country has a Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO) and a Just Transition Strategy. The strategy points out the opportunities with regard to employment generation, but at the same time emphasises that the ecological transition has to consider the social effects of its implementation. It is therefore useful to look at the Spanish experience to see how Madrid has dealt in particular with implementation.

Specifically, the Government of Spain (2020) highlights in its Just Transition Strategy:

We are facing an opportunity to improve productive and transport systems, as well as the characterisation of services, to make them much more efficient in the use of resources and offer the solutions that a decarbonised world needs. In addition, the transition to a greener economic model will generate significant employment opportunities.

At the same time, the government notes that while these opportunities are particularly important for Spain, “for the transition to a greener economic model to be socially beneficial, in a country with high unemployment rates, this transition must be the engine of new quality jobs” (Government of Spain, 2020).

A key aspect of the Spanish transition strategy is that it is being implemented in very concrete terms. This implies, among other things, a shift from polluting energies to a greater promotion of renewable energies. The Just Transition Strategy itself stresses that restructuring can lead to negative impacts on certain economic activities, giving as an example the areas of extractive activity in mining areas. Just Transition Agreements have been set up to provide financial support to regions with difficulties in coping with the energy and ecological transition. For the period from 2019 to 2021, the budget reached 130 million euros. These agreements provide for “an action plan aimed at generating comprehensive territorial development projects that guarantee employment in the medium and long term, and dynamise the transition towards a new productive scenario” (Government of Spain, 2019).

As noted above, in order to achieve a more sustainable and fairer Europe and to be able to implement the ambitious Green Pact, significant economic resources are required. In this respect, environmental taxation is key in terms of investments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce pollution of any kind and curb the loss of biodiversity. In the opinion of Cristina Narbona, “we need taxation that is not only fair, but sufficient” (Narbona, 2022). While this may seem an obvious consideration, its practical implementation, as well as its acceptance, faces significant challenges. This is precisely where one of the great difficulties lies.

In fact, recent trends show a decline in environmental taxes, according to a report by the European Environment Agency (EEA). Specifically: “In the EU, revenues from environmental taxes were €330 billion in 2019. The share of environmental taxes in total tax revenues decreased from 6.6% in 2002 to 5.9% in 2019. The trend varies across Europe, but critically, the share decreased in pioneer countries implementing environmental taxes, such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden” (RETEMA, 2022). This is not a good signal. It not only stresses the political impact and sensitivity of the nexus between the environmental and the social but also indicates that there are areas and lobbies of resistance.

This is partly but significantly connected with the relationship between the ecological transition and employment. There are fears in several European countries that a transition towards sustainability will lead to job losses in some economic sectors, often among the most politically sensitive or those more prone to social mobilization. However, the green transition – same as digitalization – implies opportunities for the generation of new jobs too in areas such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable construction, green agriculture, sustainable tourism, sustainable transport, sustainable architecture, smart cities, circular economy, etc.

A cultural change for an environmental turn

The ecological and social transition towards a sustainable economy not only requires programmes, plans and financial support from governments, but also a new business culture, focused on the ecological reconversion of productive sectors through processes and products that reduce negative effects on health and the environment. This in turn increases the efficient use of natural resources (through the circular economy) and contributes to the decarbonisation of industry. At the same time, green policies must create decent jobs – not just green jobs, but sustainable jobs – and promote the well-being of society as a whole, with an emphasis on social equity.

All this implies the promotion of Research, Development and Innovation (R&D&I), both in production and marketing. The development of new methods to increase the added value of products, a greater orientation towards quality requirements on the part of consumers, greater speed in satisfying customer demand, all constitute the basis for a cultural paradigm shift. This new situation calls for a reorganisation within companies and, at the same time, greater openness and collaboration with universities. In this context, the reconversion of human capital takes on a significant and growing importance, a reality that is closely linked to education and training.

Let us not forget the role of the consumer in this path towards a new economic model. This implies sustainable consumption, i.e. the responsibility of citizens as consumers. There are many options available to consumers to contribute directly and significantly to the ecological transition. Individual behaviour is as important as collective action and regulation. Less use of one's own car, use of bicycles, purchase of less polluting cars, energy saving, reduction of food waste, active participation in reducing and separating waste and avoiding the use of plastics are all small but significant virtuous choices that every and any citizen can do. This requires a cultural shift and a change in habits and lifestyle.

This connects us to the principle of sufficiency, which in the words of Cristina Narbona:

is a principle that will be increasingly taken into account, due to the growing depletion of many raw materials (including some necessary for decarbonisation). It goes beyond the principle of efficiency and, in my opinion, should be understood as a basic element to reduce waste and inequalities, particularly in the richest countries (Narbona, 2021).

An interesting aspect related to the sufficiency principle is the Degrowth or Post-Growth social movement, which is active internationally and present above all in countries such as Germany and Austria. The different currents – which have their

nuances – go beyond the Green Growth concept, which according to this movement focuses above all on technical innovations, efficiency, the circular economy, etc. The Degrowth movement goes beyond technical solutions to tackle the depletion of resources and advocates a more radical approach that constitutes a sort of “second wave of growth criticism” (D’Alisa, Demaria & Kallis, 2016). The Degrowth scientific-analytical basis takes up the radical thinkers of the so-called first wave of the critique of growth, such as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971) or André Gorz (1975, 1977).

At the same time, the movement goes beyond this first wave with more radical aspects. For instance, while the “steady-state” concept of the ecological economist Herman Daly is key for many critics of economic growth, it does not suffice for some of the theorists of the Degrowth movement (D’Alisa, Demaria & Kallis, 2016). More radical steps were undertaken at the Degrowth Congresses between 2014 and 2022. Topics such as the right to housing and organic farming expanded the concept (TAZ, 2020). New instances such as open borders, queer people and rules of sexuality and gender perhaps overstretched the original purpose. It may not be easy to understand or accept the new aims of the movement, especially the battle to overcoming capitalism altogether.

Perhaps the best approach to take stock of the Degrowth concept and a way to reconcile the first and second wave of criticism of growth was taken by Cristina Narbona (2021). She differs from Degrowth in that “degrowth should occur in all polluting activities or those whose competitiveness depends on unacceptable conditions for workers. On the other hand, sectors that are essential to guarantee progress should grow, particularly in the poorest countries (health, education, basic infrastructures, etc.)”. The link environment-social remains central.

With regard to the subsistence and sufficiency economy in the context of the post-growth debate, Niko Paech, a prominent German economist, was very critical of consumers and their role with regard to the consequences of the greed economy. He argued that:

Criticism of the system is often an elegant alibi for downplaying the responsibility of the individual. A systemic view would have to properly include the demand side, i.e. the cultural footprint of consumer behaviour. Consumers have never been as politically powerful as they are today, never have they had so much disposable income – and yet they are seen as passive victims of economic conditions. The dogma of growth cannot be described solely as capitalist logic, but is part of a transcendental principle of upward mobility. Competition, profit maximisation and capital accumulation can only ruin a planet if they find insatiable buyers (Folkers & Paech, 2020: 24).

In this respect, it should be recalled that among the voluntary commitments made at the international level was the United Nations 10-Year Framework of

Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns (10YFP), adopted at the 2012 UN Rio+20 conference by the heads of state. The final document, entitled “The Future We Want” provides a framework made up of six specific programmes (UNEP, 2012):

- Consumer Information
- Sustainable Public Procurement
- Sustainable Lifestyles and Education
- Sustainable Tourism (including Ecotourism)
- Sustainable Construction
- Sustainable Food Systems

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 goals and 169 targets, deepens the 10YFP programmes. It is worth recalling that Agenda 2030 was adopted in September 2015 by 193 UN Member States. On the consumption side, Goal 12 “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” is a compelling call for consumers to responsible behaviour. On the production side, Target 12.c calls for “restructuring tax systems and phasing out harmful subsidies”, such as “inefficient fossil fuel subsidies” and “wasteful consumption by removing market distortions”. Agenda 2030 is an important transformative agenda, which gives quite precise guidelines for a social and ecological transition, even though it does not express it in these terms.

Ultimately, what is utterly needed for a successful ecological and social transition is a cultural change. As the years go by, we have analysed environmental and climate problems in depth, we have undoubtedly made some progress, we have invented new technologies. Yet, we still find it difficult to understand that our planet has limits, and that nature reacts when those limits are crossed by human beings and their behaviour. A cultural change must primarily address and disseminate this understanding.

Conclusion

It is not an easy task to compare the situation described above, centred on the social and ecological transition in the European Union, with similar processes in other continents. Ecological awareness is much more evident and concrete when certain levels of well-being have already been achieved. Nevertheless, the preamble of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states “we pledge that no one will be left behind”. This connects with Goal 17: “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”. This clearly implies greater solidarity between countries in a

relatively good economic situation and countries in need of technical and financial assistance.

What has been said about the European Union (EU) above links us to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), where different governments are making considerable efforts to decarbonise their economies (promotion of renewable energies and energy efficiency, closure of thermoelectric plants, etc.) due to their international commitments, on the one hand, and their great vulnerability to the negative effects of climate change, on the other. It is worth noting that the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened the already existing inequalities in Latin America, with devastating impacts on health, the economy, education and other social aspects, such as, for example, the alarming increase in the so-called “energy poverty”.

These and other circumstances led in 2020 to an alliance between academics, social and environmental activists from several Latin American countries to create the Social, Ecological, Economic and Intercultural Pact for Latin America (Pacto Ecosocial del Sur, N/D). This initiative cannot be compared to the European Green Pact, which is a large-scale strategy, involving the 27 EU member states, and has at its disposal large economic resources that the LAC countries lack in order to initiate their own ecological and social transition. In the case of the Latin American Ecosocial Pact of the South, it is more of a manifesto calling for a “radical socio-ecological transition” in four areas: redistributive justice, gender justice, ethnic justice and environmental justice.

International cooperation undoubtedly has a key role to play in renewing and strengthening bi-regional relations between the EU and LAC. In the preface to the book *Relaunching EU-Latin America Relations: Strategic Autonomy, Advanced Cooperation and Digital, Green and Social Recovery*, Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, wrote that “democratic values form part of the common *acquis* between Latin America and Europe, at a time when these values are being challenged on a global scale”, therefore, “it is necessary to deepen our political dialogue, and it is crucial to guard against those who try to make us see the world with old logics of bipolarity” (Borrell, 2022).

Political dialogue is of paramount importance, but so is the willingness of European countries to learn from each other. It is also essential for the EU to take a holistic approach to Latin America’s economic and social difficulties. All this is within the framework of greater solidarity between the countries in good economic conditions and the countries that need technical and financial assistance. This would be expressed – in my opinion – no more and no less through a Social, Ecological and Global Transition.

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