



The Socio-Ecological Dimension of the EU Recovery

From the European Green Deal to the Recovery and Resilience Facility

SEBASTIANO SABATO
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BART VANHERCKE

SOCIAL COHESION
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Foreword

Since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the notion of sustainability has been on the international agenda and at the heart of countries' public policies. For several decades, science has been pointing to the depletion of resources and to the worsening of processes already underway and irreversible, such as climate change, the exponential loss of biodiversity, the acidification of the oceans and the reduction of the ozone layer. These processes have repercussions on the economic and social structures of countries and threaten the survival of the planet. In order to address these challenges, since the Paris Agreement the international community has made important commitments to implement the so-called ecological or 'green' transition, moving towards a more sustainable development model based on a drastic reduction of carbon emissions and with a lower impact on the environment. This process, like few others in the history of mankind, implies a substantial change of the productive model, energy use, consumption, and even of lifestyles and social relations. In addition, the crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this process for three reasons. First, it has shown once again that the transmission of viruses from animals can be associated with deforestation; second, it has shown how interdependent people and countries are. Both phenomena force us to become aware of the so-called 'globalisation of risk', according to the sociologist Ulrich Beck. Finally, sustainable growth is being placed at the heart of recovery strategies. In Europe, for example, 37% of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan funded by the Next Generation EU is to be targeted at the green and ecological transition.

This said, a number of questions arise. What will be the social implications of the ecological transition? What will be the impact of the new production model? What measures should be put in place to accompany these processes and how should social protection systems be reconfigured so that the costs of the transition are not paid by the most vulnerable? For example, what will be the role of social protection systems if it is necessary to develop policies to transform the patterns of life, production and consumption in the areas that are most fragile and threatened by climate change, as in the coastal regions highly vulnerable to floods? Bearing in mind that 40% of the world's population lives less than 100 kilometres from the coast and more than 600 million are settled in coastal regions, how will the social protection systems adapt and react to disasters? Along the same lines, how will it be possible to protect workers affected by the closure of productive activities considered

dangerous for the environment? What policies should be implemented to absorb the labour force made redundant as part of the evolution of the automotive industry towards the production of electric vehicles?

In the face of changes such as those mentioned above, that can occur in a traumatic way, public policies will have the task of favouring positive social impacts and allowing a transition that leaves no one behind.

Latin American countries are defining strategies that aim at a balance between economic growth, impact on the environment and inclusion, three interdependent dimensions. In some cases, plans for a green economy are also being designed and implemented. These are processes of great interest for a programme such as EUROsociAL+, whose main objective is to promote social cohesion. Aware that mankind is experiencing a change of era, the interconnection between economy, environment and society – in other words, between economic development, environmental sustainability and social protection – characterises the reforms and government policies which the Eurosocial programme supports, in particular within the area dedicated to welfare systems.

Thus, it seems essential to us to encourage and deepen reflection on the basis of the questions indicated earlier. In this respect, we start with a study focusing on Europe: the European Union has indeed launched (among other instruments) the European Green Deal – the first regional strategy for sustainable economic growth – and it supports a process of recovery from the Covid-19 crisis aiming at combining the three dimensions mentioned above.

The study presented here – THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF THE EU RECOVERY From the European Green Deal to the Recovery and Resilience Facility – responds to these objectives and aims to be a first contribution. Prepared by the European Social Observatory, this study analyzes the measures that are being designed – and in some cases already implemented – by the European Union and the EU member countries. It also provides insights into issues related to the social impact of the ecological transition.

This work allows to reach some preliminary conclusions or first lessons to nurture the dialogue between Europe and Latin America on the relations that must be established between the green transition and social welfare policies. Latin America is facing the challenges of the transition while experiencing its worst ever economic and social crisis, with levels of inequality and poverty that will continue in the post-pandemic recovery phase. Huge efforts are needed to make this transition fair. We hope that some of the experiences launched by the EU, analysed in this study, could serve as an inspiration on how to walk together on a path of sustainable development, ensuring better lives on the only planet we have.

Social Policy Area

European Union EUROsociAL Programme

Abstract

This report assesses the *socio-ecological* dimension of the EU's recovery strategy from the Covid-19 crisis, and identifies elements of continuity and change compared to the pre-pandemic EU growth strategy. Several possible social challenges related to the green transition are acknowledged in the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). To address these challenges, the EU proclaims a 'balanced' approach to the recovery, combining the promotion of green growth with the aim to achieve a socially just transition. For the EU, the principles and rights set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights should represent a sort of social benchmark for the green transition, while social investment policies are presented as key enablers of this transition. The RRF flags the need to implement reforms of national social protection systems and to rely on social and civic dialogue in the elaboration and implementation of national plans; however, these themes have not been explicitly linked to the green transition. The approach proposed in the RRF is strongly rooted in the European Green Deal, which has been confirmed as the EU's overarching growth strategy, to which the RRF provides new financial and governance instruments.

Several challenges ahead emerge from this research. First, the question arises as to whether the balanced approach envisaged in the RRF, with its emphasis on economic growth, will be sufficient to address in a timely manner the formidable environmental and social challenges ahead. Second, attention should be paid to possible shortcomings in the operationalization of this approach by the EU and its Member States, including the risk of relying on a narrow understanding of just transition, placing excessive emphasis on social investment policies at the expense of more traditional social protection concerns. Third, the link between the EU recovery and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should be made more explicit. The report mostly draws on a careful qualitative content-analysis of key policy and legislative documents published by EU institutions.

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Executive Summary

The objective of this report is to explore and provide a preliminary assessment of the ‘socio ecological dimension’ of the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis as envisaged by the European Union (EU), while also attempting to identify elements of continuity or discontinuity with the pre-pandemic EU growth and social strategies. First, we discuss the main challenges related to governing the interlinkages of environmental, social and economic objectives, we identify a number of approaches addressing such interlinkages, and we discuss the functions that welfare states could perform in the so-called ‘green transition’. Second, we investigate if and how the interlinkages between environmental and social concerns are addressed: i) in the most prominent EU initiatives and strategies undertaken before the Covid-19 pandemic in the economic and social domains; and ii) in the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), i.e. the main instrument set up by the Union to support the recovery of its Member States from the pandemic crisis. Furthermore, we provide a few examples of specific policy initiatives included by EU Member States in their national Recovery and Resilience Plans. A number of conclusions emerge from our analysis. First, one of the stated objectives of the RRF is to promote the ‘green transition’, an economic model geared towards achieving climate neutrality by 2050. Second, the RRF aims to implement a balanced approach based on the promotion of ‘green growth’ and of ‘just transition’ (i.e. ensuring that the opportunities and the risks of the green transition are fairly distributed across territories and social groups). In this respect, third, national welfare states are expected to play an important role. In the RRF, the principles and rights set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights are referred to as a sort of social benchmark for the green transition, while active labour market policies, education, training and skills-development policies are considered as key enablers of this transition, increasing workers’ employability in a greener economy. Furthermore, welfare states could also potentially serve as ‘buffers’ to ensure that no-one is left behind (e.g. by providing income support to citizens most affected by the transition) and provide tools to build consensus on the green transition (e.g. through social and civil dialogue). In the RRF, these two functions of welfare states are less explicitly linked to the green transition. Overall, fourth, most of the features of the RRF summarised above appear to continue from initiatives taken by the EU even before the pandemic, in particular from the European Green Deal (the EU overarching growth strategy launched in 2019) and the attempt to re-orient the European Semester (i.e. the main EU socio-economic governance tool)

towards the notion of 'competitive sustainability'. This said, fifth, in this report we also identify a number of challenges ahead. These include: i) uncertainties related to the adequacy of the EU approach in ensuring the radical and timely transformations needed to address environmental challenges; ii) possible shortcomings in the operationalization of the balanced approach by the EU and its Member States, including the risk of relying on a narrow understanding of the notion of just transition, placing an excessive emphasis on social investment policies at the expenses of more traditional social protection concerns; and iii) the need to link the EU recovery more explicitly to a broader, global policy framework such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Introduction

On 11 December 2019, the European Commission published the 'European Green Deal' (EGD), the European Union's (EU) new growth strategy aimed at transforming the EU's economy in order to achieve climate-neutrality by 2050. With the European Green Deal, for the first time, objectives related to the fight against climate change and the preservation of the environment have gained a central place in an overarching EU growth strategy, constituting a common thread linking the various actions and initiatives foreseen therein. In the EGD, the European Commission also calls for a 'socially just' transition in which 'nobody is left behind', thus explicitly recognising the close linkages between policies aiming at protecting the environment and social and economic policies. In this way, the EGD acknowledges the need to create synergies and address trade-offs in order to simultaneously achieve economic, environmental and social objectives. To do this, the European Commission has put forward the notion of 'competitive sustainability', with a view to promoting a growth model simultaneously ensuring: a) environmental sustainability; b) fairness; c) productivity growth; and d) macroeconomic stability. With the notion of competitive sustainability, the Commission has explicitly recalled the principles characterising the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In the first weeks of 2020, the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led EU Member States to take important containment measures, notably shutting down large parts of their national economies to mitigate the spread of the virus. The pandemic has had an enormous impact on European countries (and globally), in both social and economic terms, and will have long-lasting effects. Against this background, the EU has set up a recovery strategy ('Next Generation EU' - NGEU), identifying the ecological and digital transitions as the engines of EU recovery from the Covid-19 crisis and reaffirming the European Green Deal as the EU's growth strategy. In this context, a key role is to be played by social and employment policies and by national welfare states. The latter may indeed undergo adaptive pressures to accompany the ecological and digital transitions, ensuring that everyone can benefit from the opportunities they offer and is adequately protected from the risks entailed.

Against this background, this report has two main objectives. The first is to identify the ‘socio-ecological dimension’ of the Covid-19 recovery *as envisaged by the EU* and to identify elements of continuity or discontinuity with the pre-pandemic EU growth and social strategies. We will do this by identifying and discussing the key initiatives at the EU level *aimed at linking environmental and social objectives and rendering them compatible*, focussing on the NGEU’s *Recovery and Resilience Facility* (RRF) and on the most relevant EU policy documents/strategies on which the latter relies. The second objective is to provide a preliminary assessment of the socio-ecological dimension of EU recovery from the Covid-19 crisis, including its potential and possible limitations. More concretely, in this report we will try to answer the following research questions:

- a. Does the EU strategy for recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic have a socio-ecological dimension? Is there an acknowledgment of the linkages between social and environmental objectives/policies and an attempt to create synergies and address trade-offs between them?
- b. What is the approach adopted by the EU in order to link environmental, social, and economic objectives and concerns in its recovery strategy, and to what extent does this approach continue on from initiatives undertaken before the outbreak of the pandemic?
- c. What are the functions that EU welfare states are expected to perform in the context of the ‘green transition’ and which policy areas are presented as key to linking environmental and social policies in the EU strategy for the recovery?

To meet the objectives of the research and to answer the research questions, we have relied on key contributions from relevant scientific literature and stakeholders, and on an in-depth analysis of policy documents published by EU institutions. As for the latter, while the methodological choices related to the selection and analysis of documents (and their implications for the research) are set out in Annex 1, two points regarding the scope of the present report should be made here. First, as the focus of this research is the ‘socio-ecological dimension’ of the EU strategy *to recover from the Covid-19 crisis*, analysis of EU-level initiatives undertaken after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe (February/March 2020) – notably the Recovery and Resilience Facility – is a central element of this report. This said, our analysis is broader, insofar as it also includes a number of EU strategies, legislative acts and initiatives that date back to before the outbreak of the pandemic, but still play a central role in the RRF. Indeed, it would not be possible to understand several key features of the RRF (and, in general, of the EU recovery strategy from the Covid-19 crisis) without referring to previous initiatives defining the overall EU economic and social strategies such as the European Green Deal and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). A second caveat is that our analysis of these documents focuses on their *socio-ecological* dimension, i.e. on those initiatives explicitly linking environmental and social concerns. Consequently, EU initiatives pursuing merely social or ecological policy goals and, hence, disregarding

socio-ecological integration have been excluded from the present analysis or are just mentioned when necessary.

This report is structured as follows. Section 1 discusses the links between environmental, economic and social policies, the challenges arising when trying to combine objectives related to these three policy domains, and existing approaches addressing these challenges. In particular, we investigate the link between environmental and social policies, and the role that welfare states could play in order to support the creation of a more environmentally sustainable development model. Section 2 analyses relevant EU initiatives developed before or shortly after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the Commission's European Green Deal and its related strategic documents, as well as documents pertaining to the 2020 cycle of the European Semester. This analysis is complemented by a description of the key features of the European Pillar of Social Rights – one of the main EU reference frameworks in the domain of social policies – and of the Commission's ongoing attempts to link it to the green transition. The analysis of these documents is crucial to understanding the initiatives undertaken by the EU to react to the Covid-19 crisis, since key elements of these strategies and initiatives have been included (to a varying extent) in the EU recovery plan. An analysis of the socio-ecological dimension of the Recovery and Resilience Facility is at the core of Section 3, which explores the functions to be performed by welfare systems in the green transition as envisaged in the RRF and presents concrete examples of policies included by EU countries in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) (see Annex 1 for the criteria for case selection). The Conclusions wrap things up and highlight some possible limitations and shortcomings of the socio-ecological dimension of the EU recovery from the Covid-19 crisis.

1. Linking social and environmental policies: challenges and approaches ⁽¹⁾

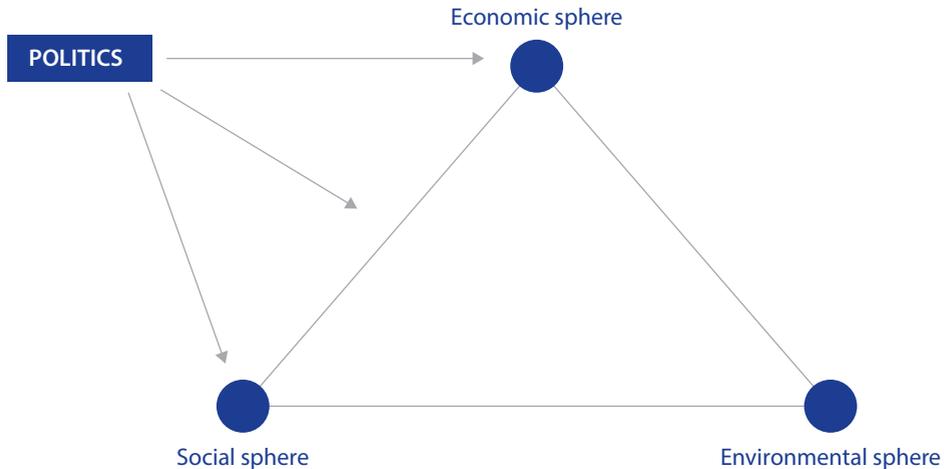
1.1. The eco-social-growth trilemma

The so-called ‘system approach to sustainable development’ (O’Connor 2007; Purvis *et al.* 2019) postulates the existence of three different spheres: economic, social and environmental. These spheres can be seen as separate systems, each of them relying on its own principles of performance and quality, normative claims and policy goals. Thus, the environmental sphere is based on the imperative of preserving the natural environment, with the goal of preventing deterioration due to the depletion of natural resources and pollution. The key objective pursued in the economic sphere is, according to this approach, to promote economic growth, while the imperative of the social sphere is the (re)distribution of welfare, preventing social risks and ensuring social justice, equity and cohesion.

The three spheres are linked in such a way that it would make little sense to treat them in isolation one from the others. Indeed, while, in some cases, objectives related to the three spheres can be pursued simultaneously (i.e. there are synergies), in other cases trade-offs arise and the pursuit of objectives related to one of the three spheres is not compatible with the pursuit of objectives specific to at least one of the other spheres. To illustrate the complexity of the interrelationships between environmental, social and economic objectives and challenges, we refer to the image of the ‘eco-social-growth trilemma’, a triangle with at its corners the economic, social and environmental spheres, each of them with their specific goals (Figure 1; see also Mandelli 2021; Sabato and Mandelli 2018). This analytical construct is useful to understand the governance of the interconnections between the three spheres and the challenges with which decision-makers are confronted while trying to pursue potentially incompatible objectives. These interconnections are regulated within a fourth ‘political’ sphere, where politico-institutional actors interact so as to channel policy demands and supply policy outputs (O’Connor 2007).

1. This Section is based on (and further develops) Sabato and Mandelli (2018) and Mandelli (2021).

Figure 1. The eco-social-growth trilemma



Source: Mandelli (2021).

1.2. Three approaches to the eco-social-growth trilemma

It is possible to identify – both at an empirical and a theoretical level – different approaches to tackling the eco-social-growth trilemma. These approaches can be differentiated according to two main criteria: a) their ‘integrative capacity’; and b) the relative importance attributed to each of the goals of environmental protection, social fairness and economic growth. Integrative capacity refers to the extent to which each of the approaches to the trilemma has the ambition or the capacity to create synergies between the three spheres (or, at least, two of them), eventually making social, environmental, and economic goals mutually reinforcing and addressing any trade-offs arising. The relative importance attributed to the three goals allows us to distinguish between two types of approaches to the trilemma: a) those that establish a hierarchical ordering between these goals, hence prioritizing one or two of them at the expense of the rest; and b) those approaches that instead give equal importance to economic, social and environmental goals. Accordingly, we can place different approaches in an analytical continuum that goes from ‘growth-first’ to ‘degrowth’ passing through ‘balanced’ approaches.

1.2.1. Growth-first versus de-growth approaches

The first approach identified can be labelled as **‘growth-first’**. It is inherently market-oriented and is based on the belief that sustained growth, free markets and technological innovations are the key ingredients of societal development, also equipping future generations with the means needed to cope with climate change (Gough

2011:16). The growth-first approach may view economic growth as either unrelated to social and environmental protection, or at odds with them. Integration between economic growth and the social and ecological spheres is only marginally considered in this approach. Its optimistic reliance on neo-liberal paradigms (Ridley 2010) has been deemed to be *irrational optimism* by some authors (Koch 2018; Gough 2011), since it results, they claim, in a severe underestimation of its socio-ecological implications.

Opposite to the growth-first approach, we find approaches promoting the **de-growth model**. De-growth can be understood as ‘an equitable downscaling of production and consumption’ (Schneider *et al.* 2010: 512). Approaches based on de-growth fundamentally question not only the supremacy but also the overall desirability of economic growth, since the latter is seen as incompatible with ecological limits and ineffective in reducing inequalities (Asara *et al.* 2015). While de-growth approaches do not manage to solve the eco-social-growth trilemma through integrated policies – notably, they do not include the key economic objective of growth – they are typically eco-social: they indeed try to bring together social and ecological priorities (Büchs and Koch 2019; Gough 2017) and to explicitly address the socio-ecological nexus.

A diverse set of approaches derives from the notion of de-growth⁽²⁾. Having as a starting point the belief that the ecological crisis and the increase in social inequalities derive from a consumption-intensive capitalist model (Koch 2018: 36), these approaches aim at ‘[...] re-embed[ding] production and consumption patterns into planetary limits through a decrease in material and energy throughputs, particularly in rich countries [...]’ (*ibid.*). For instance, the so-called *sustainable welfare* approach (Hirvilammi and Koch 2020), aims at ‘[...] satisfying human needs within ecological limits, from an inter-generational and global perspective’ (Koch *et al.* 2016: 704). The sustainable welfare approach is based on the distributive principle, calling for an equal distribution of welfare between rich and poor countries, between poor and richer population subsets within countries, and between current and future generations. In this view, the environmental dimension is fundamental and ecological limits are not only incompatible with economic growth, but also constrain social welfare. Current Western life-style patterns of consumption are deemed as incompatible with environmental protection. To make them environmentally sustainable, once basic needs are satisfied, dimensions relevant to human wellbeing other than material welfare should be prioritised (Gough 2017; Koch and Mont 2016). Thus, the sustainable welfare approach calls into question not only the feasibility of growth, but also the fiscal and social sustainability of contemporary welfare systems. Innovative eco-social policies are hence proposed by sustainable welfare scholars with regard to satisfaction of basic needs (cf. Büchs and Koch 2017).

2. See Büchs and Koch (2017) for an overview.

1.2.2. Balanced approaches

Balanced approaches are based on the assumption that economic prosperity, environmental protection and equitable well-being could and should be interconnected elements of a holistic political agenda (Monaco 2018), embracing and balancing out these three goals (Pradhan *et al.* 2017). These approaches have their roots in the ‘triple bottom line’ framework of sustainable development (O’Connor 2007; Schweikert *et al.* 2018) and, in many respects, they are close to the notion of sustainable development proposed by the United Nations (UN) in the UN 2030 Agenda for *Sustainable Development* and the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 (United Nations 2015). Agenda 2030 is indeed based on the promotion – at global level – of the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, environmental and economic. These dimensions are explicitly reflected in three of the five ‘areas of critical importance’ identified in the 2030 Agenda: people, planet and prosperity (United Nations 2015: Preamble). The first area (people) refers to granting equality of opportunities to all and fighting poverty and inequality. The second (planet) tackles environmental protection, also promoting sustainable consumption, production and natural resources management. Finally, prosperity means ‘ensur[ing] that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature’ (*ibid.*). These dimensions are recognised as closely linked, and objectives related to them should be pursued simultaneously and in a balanced manner (United Nations 2015: par. 2). From this standpoint, while economic stability and sustained economic growth are seen as desirable objectives, they should not be considered as important *per se* but should contribute to the achievement of environmental and social goals. Consequently, some observers call for a new notion of growth beyond the neo-liberal paradigm: in this view, a ‘new economics of sustainable development’ (Sommestad 2012) is needed.

Sustainable development is a broadly shared goal on which there is a certain degree of consensus among states and stakeholders at the global level. However, the question of how to achieve such an ambition in practice, balancing the three pillars of sustainability and making these compatible, is much more controversial. Consequently, balanced approaches building on the notion of sustainable development are highly diversified with regard to their integrative capacity, i.e. which and how many cross-sectoral conflicts between the three spheres they aim/are able to address.

The notion of *green growth*, for instance, mainly focuses on the environment-economy relationship. This notion gained increasing support in policy-making circles in the 2000s and was promoted by several international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which defined green growth as a way ‘[to foster] economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies’ (OECD 2011: 114). While the notion of green growth itself may be interpreted in

different ways (see Jacobs 2013), its core meaning is relatively straightforward, i.e. 'economic growth (growth of gross domestic product (GDP)) which also achieves significant environmental protection' (*ibid.*: 197). From this perspective, the growth of green sectors in the economy, besides bringing environmental benefits, could also create employment opportunities (e.g. creating new, 'green' jobs) and an overall increase of citizens' welfare. A green growth pattern would promote 'ecological modernization', which would make it possible to sustain economic growth through innovation and technological progress (Dryzek 2013), while also achieving 'decoupling', i.e. 'divorcing economic growth from its ecological impact' (Fletcher and Rammelt 2017: 450). From the perspective of green growth, a key focus of welfare states should be to invest in education, skills development and active labour market policies, with a view to enhancing workers' employability, providing them with the skills needed for the 'green economy' and for the transition from declining to expanding economic sectors (cf. OECD 2011).

While, in many respects, the socio-ecological nexus of the green growth approach appears rather narrow, addressing this nexus is at the core of another approach – *just transition* – that pays considerable attention to cushioning the negative social effects of greening the economy, by attempting to promote decent-quality employment and fulfilling the criteria of equity and redistribution (Galgóczy 2019; ILO, 2015; Sabato and Fronteddu 2020). The notion of 'just transition' – put forward by the international trade union movement during several international negotiations and conventions on climate change – was delineated in 2015 by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which elaborated a set of 'Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all' (ILO 2015), closely linked to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to the SDGs. While recognising the potentialities of green growth, in the view of the ILO, the greening of the economy also brings important challenges related, for instance, to the economic and social costs of industrial restructuring (e.g. job losses) or to the quality of the new jobs possibly created (ILO 2015: 5). In other words, the green transition would not be automatically 'just' and, in order to distribute fairly both the opportunities and the risks that it entails, the transition towards a more sustainable economy should be based on a series of principles and institutional arrangements which ensure effective implementation. From this perspective, on the one hand, social policies should endow workers with the skills and competences necessary to participate in a greener economy and, on the other hand, these policies should also protect individuals and communities during the transition. Hence, alongside effective active labour market policies, education and training policies, a just transition would require the availability of strong social protection systems to ensure healthcare, income security and social services, while social legislation should ensure the respect of fundamental principles and rights at work³. Furthermore,

3. As it is the case for green growth, the notion of just transition has been conceptualised in different ways in the academic and political debate, also depending on the type of actors referring to it. While the ILO conceptualisation is rather broad, narrower interpretations of the notion (in terms of objectives, scope and key policies for a just transition) do exist.

to be just, the transition cannot be a top-down process but, rather, it should be based on social consensus: stakeholders should be consulted in meaningful ways and, in particular, social dialogue should be ensured at all levels in the formulation, decision and implementation of strategies and policies (ILO 2015).

1.3. The welfare state and green transition: a framework for analysis

The above discussion highlights differences between the various approaches with respect to the governance of the interrelationships between the three spheres of the eco-social-growth trilemma, including its socio-ecological nexus. While the link between economic growth and social and ecological objectives has historically received much attention, a focus on the socio-environmental nexus is far more recent (Laurent 2015; Gough 2017). As highlighted by social ecology scholars, this relationship is quite strong and may follow a bidirectional pattern (Mandelli 2021). On the one hand, social logics may determine environmental damage (Laurent 2015) and the welfare state has an 'ecological footprint' (Matthies 2017). On the other hand, environmental protection is critical to long-term social welfare, and ecological degradation has significant social costs. With regard to the latter aspect, both the responsibility for and impacts of the deterioration of the environment are unevenly distributed among societal members, leading some scholars to talk about a 'double injustice' (Walker 2012): the poorest social groups are, on the one hand, less responsible for environmental degradation and, on the other hand, more vulnerable to its consequences, since they are less financially equipped to deal with the adverse consequences of environmental catastrophes (Gough 2017). This injustice then becomes a triple one, if one considers that many environmental policies (and, in particular, climate mitigation policies) may be socially regressive in nature, thus further exacerbating inequalities (Büchs *et al.* 2011; Gough 2019).

Considering the importance of the socio-ecological nexus and the key features of the approaches described in Section 1.2 (cf. also Gough 2017; Laurent 2015; Schaffrin 2014), one could identify at least four **functions**⁽⁴⁾ that welfare states could perform in the green transition⁽⁵⁾:

- a. Welfare states as *benchmarks for the green transition*. National welfare states are based on specific social principles, attributing social rights to citizens. These principles and rights could act as a benchmark for designing and implementing

4. The four functions relate to different dimensions of public policies: a) the normative dimension (welfare states as benchmarks for the green transition); b) policy programmes and instruments (welfare states as enablers of or buffers in the green transition); and c) the procedural dimension (welfare states as consensus builders or conflict-management tools).

5. Here we refer to the 'green transition' in a generic way, i.e. as a transformation of economic and development models to make them more environmentally sustainable.

- instruments in other policy domains (Schaffrin 2014:30), including environmental policies. In this sense, the principles and rights embedded in welfare states would affect (and sometimes constrain) the green transition by defining social justice criteria to be considered and respected while designing policies. From this perspective, for instance, while policies for the green transition usually highlight the creation of new (green) jobs, national social legislation would also emphasise aspects related to the quality of these jobs, e.g. in terms of wages and health and safety conditions. Similarly, the need to protect vulnerable households, ensuring adequate and affordable access to clean energy, would affect the design of low-carbon energy policies. This is especially true since the latter policies often result in increasing energy prices, which can in turn boost domestic energy expenditure to such an extent that vulnerable households become at risk of energy poverty.
- b. Welfare states as *enablers of the green transition*. In this perspective, the emphasis is on the social investment function of the welfare state, i.e. on its role in fostering the development of capabilities and human capital, providing the skills needed in a greener economic model and facilitating the transition of workers between economic sectors. The focus is on social investment policies ⁽⁶⁾ such as education and training, re-skilling, and active labour market policies.
 - c. Welfare states as *buffers in the green transition*. In this perspective, the focus is on the redistributive function of the welfare state and on social protection policies (e.g. unemployment and minimum income schemes, healthcare and pensions). These policies can act as buffers, to ensure that all citizens are protected during the transition and to tackle any increases in inequalities possibly deriving from the transition process.
 - d. Welfare states as *consensus-builders or conflict-management tools* of the green transition. In this sense, welfare state provision and institutions could be used to build consensus on the green transition or to manage the conflicts inevitably deriving from it. Social and civic dialogue institutions and practices would be key in this respect.

It is important to note that welfare states may potentially perform all the functions described above (to a differing extent, depending on national features), and that specific social policies may perform more than one function at once. This said, performing these functions would require adjustments – some more radical, some less so – to the logic and institutions of traditional welfare states and to the logic and institutions of what had been dubbed the ‘eco-state’. In this respect, there is a growing literature on the interaction between welfare and environmental regimes, sometimes summarised in the notion of ‘eco-welfare states’. The latter notion refers to potentially different configurations of coordinated ecological and social protection systems (Zimmermann and

6. For a discussion of the notion of social investment and of social investment-oriented policies, cf. Hemerijck (2012, 2017); Morel *et al.* (2012).

Graziano 2020). These coordinative processes may give rise to different integration dynamics between environmental and social policies, in terms of the normative frames adopted, the strategic approaches and the actual programmatic and operative policy instruments chosen.

Notably, regarding the interaction between environmental and social policies, policy-making could follow three types of **logic**:

- a. The *silos logic*, i.e. complete separation between environmental and social policy-making;
- b. *Parallel development* of policies. Social policy objectives and tools are defined independently from environmental objectives and tools, but with an attempt to take the latter into account (to a varying extent);
- c. *Eco-social policy-integration*, i.e. policies are designed to achieve interconnected and explicit ecological and social goals (cf. Mandelli 2021). In this respect, for instance, some policies may be explicitly designed to address the social implications of environmental risks or of environmental-protection policies, or to facilitate the ecological transition.

The following sections provide an analysis of a number of EU documents, strategies and instruments closely linked to the recovery plan for Europe, with a view to identifying the socio-ecological dimension of the latter. This analysis will allow us to identify the approach followed in order to link environmental, economic and social concerns during the recovery, the function to be performed by welfare states, and the logic of interaction between social and environmental policies.

2. EU reference frameworks for a socio-ecological transition

This Section provides an overview of the EU reference frameworks potentially relevant to the socio-ecological transition in the context of the Covid-19 recovery. First, we discuss the current EU ‘grand strategy’ – the European Green Deal – and a number of sectoral strategies closely linked to the latter. In doing so, we try to identify the socio-ecological dimension of these strategies, mapping the policy issues that are presented as having both social and ecological implications, as well as describing the approach put forward to govern such challenges. In this Section we also identify and analyse the main policy instruments addressing socio-ecological challenges linked to these strategies. Second, we shortly describe the main features of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which could be considered the main EU framework in the social domain, and how it has been linked to the European Green Deal. Third, we conclude this Section by illustrating how the EU has attempted to integrate economic, environmental and social issues and objectives into its main socio-economic policy instrument, the European Semester.

2.1. The European Green Deal and sectoral strategies

2.1.1. The European Green Deal and sectoral strategies: an overview

Launched by the European Commission in December 2019, the **European Green Deal** is the current growth strategy of the European Union, effectively replacing the Europe 2020 strategy. Like its predecessor, the EGD (European Commission 2019a) sets policy objectives and instruments to achieve economic growth at the EU level and, in doing so, defines the characteristics of the economic model that it aims to foster. However, in stark contrast with the past, the EGD gives central priority to environmental challenges. Accordingly, ‘it resets the Commission’s commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges that is this generation’s defining task’ (European Commission 2019a: 2). Hence, ecological challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are recognized as urgent, complex and interlinked policy problems to which the EGD is expected to provide a response. The objective of the EGD is

twofold: first, 'to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use'; and second 'to protect, conserve and enhance the EU's natural capital, and protect the health and well-being of citizens from environment-related risks and impacts' (European Commission 2019a:2). Thus, although it is primarily a strategy for economic growth, the EGD does not focus solely on boosting growth. On the contrary, its aim is to accelerate and underpin the transition towards an economic model that would protect both the EU natural capital and European citizens, referred to as 'the green transition'.

In order to deliver on its objectives, the EGD Communication put forward a 'roadmap of key policies and measures' (European Commission 2019b), comprising both new and existing initiatives. This roadmap identifies eight areas of action in different policy fields (European Commission 2019a: 4), ranging from climate policies to industrial policy and the protection of biodiversity ⁽⁷⁾. Besides activities in these areas, the EGD Communication also recognizes the need to 'mainstream sustainability in all EU policies' (European Commission 2019a: 15) ⁽⁸⁾ and to promote the objectives of the EGD across the world, presenting the EU as a 'global leader' in the ecological transition. Finally, a European Climate Pact is proposed in the Communication on the EGD, to make sure that relevant stakeholders and EU citizens are involved in, informed about, as well as actively engaged in EU climate action through dedicated grassroots initiatives. The European Climate Pact was ultimately published in December 2020 (European Commission 2020p).

For each of the main dimensions of the strategy, the Annex to the EGD puts forward an indicative timeline of actions that the European Commission undertakes to pursue (European Commission 2019b).

At the time of writing ⁽⁹⁾, some relevant documents have already been published by the European Commission, ranging from strategies, to plans of action, to proper legislative measures. Although it falls outside the scope of this contribution to present each of these measures in detail, it is worth mentioning some of them. Presented by the European Commission in January 2020, the *Sustainable Europe Investment Plan* is the investment pillar of the European Green Deal' (European Commission 2020c: 1). It is a

7. The eight areas for action are: a) increasing the EU's climate ambition for 2030 and 2050; b) supplying clean, affordable and secure energy; c) mobilising industry for a clean and circular economy; d) building and renovating in an energy and resource efficient way; e) accelerating the shift to sustainable and smart mobility; f) from 'Farm to Fork': designing a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system; g) preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity; and h) a zero pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment.

8. Including by: a) enabling and financing the green transition, while also making it 'just'; b) encouraging Member States to use national budgets, tax reforms and State aids for green purposes; c) mobilizing research and fostering innovation; d) enhancing activating education and training policies; and e) making sure that all EU initiatives 'live up to a green oath to 'do no harm'' (European Commission 2019a: 19).

9. June 2021.

plan to mobilize public and private investment through the EU budget and other financial instruments around climate and environmental objectives, while also providing enabling tools for investors, as well as targeted support in the identification, structuring and execution of funded projects. *The Just Transition Mechanism* and its related Fund (see Section 2.1.3 for more details) have also been put forward as part of this investment plan. In March 2020, the Commission issued a *proposal for a European Climate Law* (European Commission 2020e), enshrining in legislation the EU's target of achieving climate neutrality by 2050. According to Article 2(3) of the proposal, the European Commission undertakes to review the EU's 2030 climate targets set out in 2018 through the governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action (European Union 2018b) exploring 'options for a new 2030 target of 50 to 55% emissions reductions compared to 1999' (European Commission 2020e: 14). Ultimately, in September 2020, after an 'impact assessment and a broad consultation process' (European Commission 2020m: 2), a new Communication concluded that 'the EU can and should set itself a 55% target' (*ibid*).

Furthermore – and again as part of the EGD roadmap – the European Commission has issued a number of sectoral strategies, i.e. non-legislative policy measures. These include: *A new industrial Strategy for Europe*, to provide the conditions for 'Europe's industry to lead the twin transitions and drive [the EU's] competitiveness' (European Commission 2020f: 1); a new *Circular Economy Action Plan*, with a view to fostering a 'regenerative growth model that gives back to the planet more than it takes' (European Commission 2020g: 2) through dedicated products and waste policies; a *Farm to Fork Strategy*, to enable the transition towards a sustainable food system benefitting also all citizens and operators and promoting human and natural health (European Commission 2020h); a *Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy*, to achieve a 90% reduction in transport sector emissions by 2050 (European Commission 2020q); and, finally, a strategy to trigger a *Renovation wave for Europe*, 'breaking down long-standing barriers to energy and resource-efficient renovation' (European Commission 2020n: 2), hence attempting to keep building renovation rates in line with the more ambitious 2030 climate targets.

Particularly relevant is also the *European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience* (European Commission 2020k). Updating the former 2016 Skills Agenda, this strategy is intended to deliver on Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, 'Education, training and life-long learning' (see Section 2.2), while also being anchored in the objectives of the EGD and of the EU recovery strategy from the Covid-19 crisis. The *Skills Agenda* consists in a 5-year plan, setting targets for up and re-skilling, as well as twelve enabling actions to deliver on these targets. It is meant to deliver on the objectives and the priority areas of the EGD: as the Commission recognizes, 'it is only with the right skills that Europe can strengthen its position in global competition and have a sustained economic relaunch geared towards the green and digital transition' (European Commission 2020k: 2). Thus, improving skills is presented

as a way to facilitate green growth and the ecological transition. In this framework, investing in training and education measures for the green transition would allow people not only to 'build and master green technologies' (European Commission 2020k: 12), but also to understand 'how to think and act green' (*ibid.*). In particular, 'Action 6' of the European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness comprises a set of initiatives that the Commission undertakes to implement to support the development and acquisition of green skills. These include improving the monitoring procedures of skills for the green transition through dedicated taxonomy and indicators; developing a 'European competence framework on education for climate change, environmental issues, clean energy transition and sustainable development' (European Commission 2020k: 13); helping to develop a green skill set for the labour market; and supporting the integration of climate and environmental issues in education and training.

2.1.2. The socio-ecological dimension of the European Green Deal

As stated above, the European Green Deal addresses the economic-ecological nexus by promoting the transition towards an economic model decoupled from its ecological footprint, also with a view to exploiting the opportunities that will arise from the greening of the economy. Although more marginally than the economic-ecological dimension, the EGD also tackles **socio-ecological challenges**, in particular those that pertain to the social implications of environmental issues and policies. In doing so, the EGD often refers to the need to promote a **just transition**, leaving 'no one behind' (see Section 2.2).

The EGD considers the interconnected nature of the various policy areas that it addresses, taking into account not only synergies but also some possible negative relationships. As acknowledged in the Commission's Communication, 'while all of these areas for action are strongly interlinked and mutually reinforcing, careful attention will have to be paid when there are potential trade-offs between economic, environmental and social objectives' (European Commission 2019a: 4). With respect to socio-ecological issues, although there is no attempt to systematically measure the impact of its proposals, the EGD recognizes the potentially detrimental social consequences of the ecological transition. It explicitly states that 'the most vulnerable are the most exposed to the harmful effects of climate change and environmental degradation' (European Commission 2019a: 16) and that 'citizens, depending on their social and geographic circumstances, will be affected in different ways' (*ibid.*). The socio-ecological challenges explicitly considered in the EGD can be divided into two groups.

The first group consists of challenges for consumers, especially **vulnerable consumers**, affected by the transition. Notably, the Commission recognizes the need to involve and support consumers in the decarbonization of the energy system, paying particular attention to households that cannot afford the key energy services

necessary to ensure a basic standard of living and social housing, hence addressing the risk of *energy poverty* in Europe ⁽¹⁰⁾. Thus, as a first group of socio-ecological challenges, the EGD addresses issues related to domestic energy use, pointing out how disproportionate energy expenditure and the carbon footprint of energy consumption are two sides of the same coin. Other EGD areas and initiatives also pay considerable attention to the impact of the transition on consumers, including the Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission 2020g), the Farm to Fork Strategy (European Commission 2020h) and the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (European Commission 2020q). All these acknowledge the impact of consumers' choices on the transition; however no instruments have yet been put forward within these strategies to tackle socio-ecological challenges. Both the Circular Economy Action Plan and the Farm to Fork Strategy focus especially on duly informing and empowering consumers. With regard to distributional and re-distributional concerns, the Circular Economy Action Plan should aim at 'making circularity work for people, regions and cities' (European Commission 2020g: 15), although this is mostly framed in terms of skills and job creation, while the Farm to Fork Strategy recognizes the need 'to improve the availability and price of sustainable food' (European Commission 2020h: 13). Finally, the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy's 'Flagship 9' aims at 'making mobility fair and just for all' (European Commission 2020q: 20), explicitly recognizing the need to make transport accessible and affordable for low-income consumers, as well as for people with disabilities and low IT-literacy.

Second, the European Green Deal refers to the impact of the transition on **employment**, with a marked **sectoral and territorial focus**, i.e. calling for specific attention to the regions, industries and workers who will face 'the greatest challenges' (European Commission 2019a: 2). While the green transition is presented in the EGD and in several of its related documents as an opportunity for creating new and more sustainable jobs, synergies are not always possible. On the contrary, the Commission recognizes how 'managing the transition will lead to significant structural changes in business model, skill requirements and relative prices' (European Commission 2019a: 16), which in turn could have detrimental social effects. Most attention is paid to sectors – and territories – facing processes of *industrial restructuring as a consequence of the low-carbon transition*, namely fossil fuel mining and exploration, as well as greenhouse gas-intensive activities (European Commission 2020c). Redundant workers from these sectors, as well as the local communities they belong to, are considered as vulnerable and are consequently targeted with tailored support (see Section 2.1.3 below). Another example in this respect is the above-mentioned Sustainable and Smart Mobility

10. Energy poverty can be seen as an inherently socio-ecological issue. Indeed, it is caused by both social factors (notably, income poverty) and ecological factors (transition policies resulting in increasing energy prices and poor energy efficiency of dwellings). Furthermore, energy poverty has important political implications, giving rise to both social and ecological policy demands. From a social point of view, there is the call to protect energy-poor households and ensure their access to affordable and clean energy services. From an ecological point of view, there is the need to involve vulnerable energy consumers in building renovation efforts to contribute to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Strategy's 'Flagship 9', which acknowledges socio-ecological challenges for transport workers related to the risks brought about by automation and the energy transition.

2.1.3. Key policy instruments for delivering the just transition framework

Several policy instruments, ranging from legislative measures to soft law actions, have been proposed at the EU level to underpin the effective delivery of the just transition framework. As stated above, the EGD acknowledges and addresses mainly two types of socio-ecological challenges. Accordingly, this Section discusses: a) transition policies targeting vulnerable energy consumers, or people at risk of energy poverty; and b) transition policies targeted at redundant workers formerly employed in greenhouse gas-intensive sectors, and their communities.

Transition policies targeting vulnerable energy consumers and people at risk of energy poverty

The primary competence for dealing with energy poverty in the EU lies with the Member States, since the matter, although highly inter-sectoral, falls within the realm of social policies, which remain a national prerogative to this day. However, the EU has long been developing a policy framework to address this pressing political challenge. In 2018, 34 million Europeans were unable to keep their homes adequately warm (European Commission 2020n). While access to energy services is considered a right under the European Pillar of Social Rights (see Section 2.2), the European Commission does not present energy poverty as a merely social issue. Indeed, it would have 'the potential to bring multiple benefits, including lower spending on health, reduced air pollution (by replacing heating sources that are not fit for purpose), improved comfort and wellbeing, and improved household budgets' (European Commission 2020o: 1). At the same time, in the view of the Commission, not taking vulnerable consumers into due consideration might bring about considerable socio-ecological trade-offs, ultimately threatening or slowing down the energy transition. This is because, as the recitals of the Electricity Directive recognize, energy poverty is an inherently crosscutting problem arising from a combination of low incomes, high energy expenditure and poor energy efficiency of dwellings (European Union 2019).

A notable development in the field of energy poverty policies came in 2016, with the proposal for a Clean Energy for All Europeans package (European Commission 2016). The latter was designed as part of the Energy Union and was intended to promote, among other objectives, a 'just' energy transition, meaning good for all consumers, especially vulnerable ones. Although no common definition was proposed in the package, energy poverty was explicitly recognized as a major challenge across the EU (*ibid.*: 11). Several pieces of legislation within the package may be considered relevant for the alleviation of energy poverty. First, the recast

Electricity Directive (European Union 2019) requires Member States that identify energy poverty as a salient challenge to define a set of measurement criteria for the identification of energy-poor households and to take appropriate measures to address the problem, including by informing customers about possible alternatives to disconnection. The Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (European Union 2018a) makes EU countries responsible for outlining national actions taken to alleviate energy poverty and it invites them to prioritize worst-performing buildings in their long-term renovation strategies. The Energy Efficiency Directive (European Union 2018c) asks Member States to implement a share of energy efficiency savings as a priority in energy-poor households and social housing, or, alternatively, to consider energy poverty while fulfilling their energy efficiency obligations. Finally, the Regulation on the Governance of the *Energy Union and Climate Action* (European Union 2018b) defines a governance process to monitor and report on energy poverty, as well as to set quantifiable national targets and policy measures for its alleviation. In this framework, the Member States should elaborate National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), identifying their respective contribution to the achievement of the binding EU energy-climate targets and objectives. Notably, the National Energy and Climate Plans should be also used to monitor and report on energy poverty, in those countries for which energy poverty has been identified as a priority. Besides these legislative initiatives, the European Commission also set up an Energy Poverty Observatory in December 2016 to facilitate Member States' actions addressing energy poverty. Finally, funding opportunities, mainly falling under the cohesion policies, could also be mobilized to address vulnerabilities related to energy consumption (European Commission 2020o).

More recent actions have been taken by the European Commission in the framework of the EGD, mainly through the Commission's Communication '*A Renovation Wave for Europe*' (European Commission 2020n). As part of the latter, the Commission issued a set of nine recommendations to the Member States, including: to develop a systematic approach to the liberalization of the energy market; to take into account the Commission's guidance on energy poverty indicators; to assess the distributional effects of the energy transition; to ensure participation, stakeholder engagement and multilevel cooperation when developing energy poverty measures; and to target existing funds at energy-poor households, with the aim to 'produce integrated policy solutions as part of energy and social policy' (European Commission 2020o: 5). Furthermore, the Commission launched an Affordable Housing Initiative in October 2020 to provide technical assistance concerning the energy renovation and revitalization of 100 social housing projects. Designed as a model to be replicated, this project is supposed to 'promote efficient, circular and modular processes, social engagement models to empower residents, inclusive and accessible developments and cultural innovation' (European Commission 2020n: 22).

Transition policies targeted at redundant workers employed in greenhouse gas-intensive sectors and their communities

The second set of socio-ecological issues emerging from the EGD relate to sectors and territories that depend on fossil fuels or carbon-intensive economic processes, recognized as ‘the most affected by the transition’ (European Commission 2019a: 16). In this respect, as part of the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan (European Commission 2020c), the European Commission proposed a Just Transition Mechanism (JTM). This instrument is meant to support the low-carbon transition of stated sectors and territories, since, in the view of the Commission, these require extra funds to face the challenges ahead. The JTM was presented as the core policy instrument in the EGD framework to ‘leave no one behind’, addressing the socio-economic consequences of decarbonization. The JTM has a targeted scope and promotes social investment policies (Sabato and Fronteddu 2020). On the one hand, it specifically benefits certain social groups. On the other hand, as a financial tool, the JTM provides targeted support to workers, in the shape of social investment.

Against this background, the *Just Transition Mechanism* sets the conditions for the mobilization of public and private funding and targets it at certain fossil fuel-dependent territories. The JTM consists of three pillars. The first pillar is the so-called Just Transition Fund (JTF), proposed through a dedicated Regulation in January 2020 (European Commission 2020a). Subsumed into the realm of cohesion policies, the JTF is intended to reduce regional disparities enhanced as a consequence of the transition, in EU territories with high employment in coal, lignite, oil shale, peat and energy-intensive industries. Initially, the European Commission’s proposal equipped the new fund with €7.5 billion coming from the EU budget. Later on, the Commission proposed to increase the total reserve of the fund up to €40 billion. Ultimately, the European Parliament and the Council agreed on a budget of €17.5 billion, increasing the initial proposed envelope by €10 billion taken from the Next Generation EU programme (European Commission 2020r) (see Section 3). The scope of the JTF includes two types of activities: first, support for economic diversification, innovation, business creation and green investments; second, upskilling and reskilling of workers, job-search assistance to jobseekers and active inclusion of jobseekers. With respect to the governance of the JTF, the Commission’s Regulation proposal sets out a multilevel process involving the EU, national and local authorities, as well as relevant stakeholders, based on Territorial Just Transition Plans. In these documents, Member States are asked to identify beneficiary territories; assess the social, economic and environmental impacts and challenges of the low-carbon transition in the territories; and describe the types of operations envisaged, their contribution to the objectives of the JTF, as well as their reference governance mechanisms. The European Semester process also contributes to the implementation of the Territorial Just Transition Plans. Annex D of the 2020 Country Reports provides specific guidelines to help the Member States prepare their Territorial Just Transition Plans, including suggested investment priorities (European

Commission 2020d). The two other pillars of the Just Transition Mechanism are a public sector loan facility channelling funds from the European Investment Bank (European Commission 2020j) and a dedicated 'just transition' scheme mobilizing private investment within Invest EU (European Commission 2020c). Additionally, other cohesion funds, especially the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund Plus, should also help to achieve the objectives of the JTM, by providing additional resources for initiatives and reforms in the territories concerned. Finally, the European Commission has also set up a Just Transition Platform, building upon the experience of the previous Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition, with a view to supporting stakeholders involved with activities related to the JTM.

2.2. The European Pillar of Social Rights and just transition

Although the EGD is primarily a growth strategy, one of its ambitions is also to ensure that the green transition is 'just and inclusive' (European Commission 2019a: 2), i.e. that, on the one hand, 'no one [is left] behind' in the transition and, on the other hand, that the transition is based on broad social acceptance and active public participation. The latter is seen as a precondition for the success of the transition. When referring to the need for a just transition, the focus of the EGD is threefold (Sabato and Fronteddu 2020). First, there is a targeted approach focusing on specific groups of particularly vulnerable people, workers and communities. Second, there is a focus on social investment policies, i.e. on policies enabling the green transition, for instance, by providing workers with the competences and skills needed. Third, a reference is made to the European Pillar of Social Rights as the key policy framework to ensure that the transition is fair and just for everybody. While policies and instruments more directly related to the first two perspectives on just transition have been presented in the previous sections, in this Section we provide a brief description of the main elements of the European Pillar of Social Rights and its link with the green transition.

2.2.1. The European Pillar of Social Rights: key features

Jointly proclaimed by EU institutions in 2017, the **European Pillar of Social Rights** is designed to be a reference framework to steer the employment and social performance of EU Member States, with a view to promoting upward convergence in social standards. The EPSR provides normative standards for European labour markets and welfare systems, to be implemented through both EU and national policies. It is made up of a set of twenty rights and principles, organized around three thematic Chapters (European Commission 2017): a) equal opportunities and access to the labour market; b) fair working conditions; and c) social protection and inclusion. The EPSR is also accompanied by a social scoreboard monitoring Member States' situations and performances in most of the domains covered by the Pillar.

While previous initiatives in the social domain undertaken by the EU during the 2000s and the 2010s followed a marked social investment logic, emphasising the importance of education, training and active labour market policies, the EPSR combines this approach with a clear rights-based perspective, emphasising the importance of social protection policies and fair working conditions (Sabato and Corti 2018). Thus, for instance, while recognising that a certain degree of flexibility in employment relationships is needed to ensure that employers can adapt to changes in the economic context, the EPSR also makes it clear that employment relationships that lead to precarious working conditions should be prevented and open-ended forms of employment should be promoted (EPSR, Principle 5). Similarly, besides affirming workers' rights to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning (Principle 1) and to receive support for job search, training and re-qualification (Principle 4), the EPSR also states the right to fair wages that provide a decent standard of living (Principle 6) and to adequate social protection (Principle 12). Consequently, citizens and workers should have the right to unemployment and minimum income benefits, combining adequate income support for a reasonable amount of time with measures promoting a quick re-integration into the labour market (Principles 13 and 14).

It is important to keep in mind that the EPSR is a non-binding document: the implementation of the rights and principles it contains is a shared *political* commitment and responsibility of the EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities, social partners and civil society. Its non-binding character notwithstanding, since its proclamation the EPSR has informed much of EU social policy-making, becoming an essential component of EU socio-economic governance and spurring the elaboration of a number of non-legislative and legislative initiatives at the EU level in domains such as work-life balance, working conditions, pay transparency, access to social protection and the minimum wage (Box 1).

Box 1. Examples of EU initiatives implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights

- Directive on **work-life balance** for parents and carers (adopted in July 2019);
- Directive on **transparent and predictable working conditions** (adopted in June 2019);
- Council Recommendation on **access to social protection** for workers and the self-employed (adopted in November 2019);
- Proposal by the European Commission (March 2021) for a Directive on **pay transparency** to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women;
- Proposal by the European Commission (October 2020) for a Directive on **adequate minimum wages** in the European Union;
- Proposal by the European Commission (March 2021) for a Council Recommendation establishing a **European Child Guarantee**.

Source: authors' elaboration based on European Commission (2021b).

2.2.2. The European Pillar of Social Rights and the green transition

From an integration perspective, the EPSR is an attempt to link the social and economic spheres, recognising how 'economic and social progress are intertwined, and the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights should be part of wider efforts to build a more inclusive and sustainable growth model' (European Commission 2017, recital 11). However, besides this generic reference to the sustainability of the growth model, the socio-ecological nexus was largely missing in the principles of the 2017 EPSR, a partial exception being the recognition of the right to access good quality essential services, including water, sanitation, and energy (Principle 20).

After the publication of the European Green Deal, the link between the EPSR and the green transition was made more explicit. As stated in the Communication 'A Strong Social Europe for Just Transition', the EPSR 'is [the EU's] social strategy to make sure that the transition[s] of climate neutrality' is 'socially fair and just' (European Commission 2020b: 2). In this Communication, there is indeed a first attempt to link the EPSR to the green and digital transitions (dubbed 'the twin transitions'), particularly stressing two areas of intervention relating to the governance of **socio-ecological challenges**: a) equipping people with the *skills* needed for the green transition; and b) addressing *energy poverty* and the *distributional consequences of the energy transition*.

As we will show in Section 3, the linkages between the EPSR and the green transition were further developed after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic through the publication of a Commission Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR, in March 2021. Among other things, in the Action Plan the European Commission (2021b) has put forward three headline targets to be reached at the EU level by 2030 and intended to guide policy decisions in the Member States: a) at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 to be in employment by 2030; b) at least 60% of all adults participating in training every year; and c) reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million. The Commission's Action Plan and, more in general, the way ahead for the implementation of the EPSR were further discussed during a special Social Summit held in Porto in May 2021, bringing together EU Heads of State and Government, the Presidents of EU institutions, and representatives of the social partners and of civil society organisations (cf. Council of the EU 2021; Porto Social Summit 2021).

2.3. The European Semester and competitive sustainability

Launched in 2011, the European Semester is an annual governance framework for the coordination of reforms undertaken by EU Member States in domains such as macro-economic, fiscal, employment and social policies. In this framework, Member States are required to report on key policy challenges and on national reforms, while the

European Commission and the Council monitor such progress and provide Country-specific Recommendations.

The 2020 (European Commission 2019c) and 2021 (European Commission 2020l) Annual Sustainable Growth Strategies set out the priorities for the Union in the domains covered by the Semester, identifying '**competitive sustainability**' as a new paradigm to foster growth in the EU and to address the interrelated challenges with which the Union is confronted (European Commission 2019c: 13). The notion of competitive sustainability comprises four different dimensions: 'environmental sustainability', 'productivity growth', 'fairness' and 'macro-economic stability'. Through this multidimensional concept, not only has attention to environmental and climate issues considerably increased in the European Semester compared to the past, but the intertwinement between different policy goals has gained unprecedented space (Sabato and Mandelli 2021). Accordingly, competitive sustainability should ensure that 'synergies can be created, trade-offs between the four dimensions of the growth agenda can be addressed and solutions presented' (European Commission 2019c: 2).

All in all, these changes have contributed to aligning the 2020 European Semester to the principles of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indeed, in the view of the von der Leyen Commission, the European Semester should become an instrument that helps to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals. Accordingly, the 2020 Country Reports⁽¹¹⁾ make several explicit references to the 17 SDGs, including in the 'Executive Summary', in a dedicated paragraph of the section 'Economic situation and outlook' and in a new Annex E on 'Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals', where SDG-related indicators are also featured.

Besides the SDGs, through the notion of competitive sustainability, the Commission has also tried to incorporate the objectives of the EGD into the 2020 European Semester outputs and procedures, presenting it as the main strategic framework guiding the Semester. Consequently, various environmental challenges are addressed through the 2020 Country Reports, and their Annex C features a table on 'green growth performance' indicators. The increased importance of the environmental dimension has not resulted in less attention being paid to social issues and policies. On the contrary, the European Semester is still a key tool to monitor progress made in the implementation of the principles of the EPSR, by reference to the indicators contained in the Social Scoreboard.

The competitive sustainability narrative has fed into all the various European Semester outputs produced in 2020. In particular, according to the European Commission

11. The Country Reports are documents drawn up every year (until 2020: they were discontinued in 2021 as a result of the launch of the RRF) by the European Commission in the framework of the European Semester. In these documents, the Commission analyses the situation and reforms undertaken in the Member States in the policy areas covered by the Semester. On this basis, the European Commission addresses Country-specific Recommendations to the Member States.

(2020d:2), the 2020 Country Reports 'present a thorough analysis of the key socio-economic challenges of macro-economic relevance each Member State faces around the four dimensions of competitive sustainability'. Similarly, the 2020 Country-specific Recommendations attempt to frontline competitive sustainability, while also addressing the challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic (European Commission 2020i). Thus, mitigating the social impacts of the pandemic and fostering sustainable investments in areas such as energy, waste, water management and transport are recurring key messages in the Country-specific Recommendations addressed to Member States in 2020.

3. The socio-ecological dimension of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility

3.1. The EU response to the Covid-19 crisis: Next Generation EU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the EU took unprecedented initiatives to help its Member States cope with the social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis. In particular, as early as May 2020, the European Commission put forward the proposal for an EU-wide recovery plan – called Next Generation EU – with a view to providing financial support to the Member States as they tackled the social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, and to paving the way for the recovery (European Commission 2020s). In the Commission's view, actions for the recovery should be *in continuity with the European Green Deal* and with the notion of *competitive sustainability* characterising the 2020 European Semester: in this sense, the economic response to the Covid-19 crisis 'would [offer] a unique opportunity to accelerate the green transition' (European Commission 2020l: 3). At the same time, the recovery and transition process should be 'fair for all Europeans [...] to prevent growing inequalities, ensure support from all parts of the society and contribute to social, economic and territorial cohesion' (*ibid.*: 7-8, bold removed). Thus, in defining their responses to the crisis, the Member States were invited 'to factor in', across green policy areas, the need to ensure a just and socially fair transition and to adopt measures ensuring equal opportunities, inclusive education, fair working conditions and adequate social protection 'in the light of the European Pillar of Social Rights' (European Commission 2020l: 8).

After difficult and lengthy negotiations between national governments and EU institutions, the Union agreed, in December 2020, on the Next Generation EU recovery programme, endowing it with €750 billion to be distributed among the Member States (European Union 2021). At the centre of Next Generation EU is the **Recovery and Resilience Facility**, consisting of €672.5 billion (€360 billion in loans and €312.5 billion in grants) available to support reforms and investments undertaken by EU Member States. In order to have access to these resources, EU countries are expected to submit

National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) ⁽¹²⁾, in which they set out in detail reforms and investments to be completed by 2026.

The reforms and investments included in the plans should be identified on the basis of the European Semester (including the European Pillar of Social Rights) and be consistent with the Paris Agreement, Member States' National Energy and Climate Plans, the national just transition plans, the Youth Guarantee implementation plans, as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (European Union 2021: recital 4). In particular, NRRPs should identify measures that refer to policy areas of European relevance structured in **six pillars**, deemed as key to achieving recovery from the Covid-19 crisis and to enhancing the long-term resilience of the EU and of its Member States (European Union 2021: recital 10): a) green transition; b) digital transformation; c) smart, sustainable and inclusive growth; d) social and territorial cohesion; e) health, and economic, social and institutional resilience; and f) policies for the next generation, children and youth.

Importantly, from a financial point of view, Member States' plans should be centred around the promotion of the **green and digital transitions**, allocating: a) a minimum of 37% of expenditure to investments and reforms that support climate objectives, to be calculated on the basis of a binding methodology tracking climate-related expenditure included as an Annex to the RRF Regulation (European Union 2021: Annex VI); and b) a minimum of 20% of expenditure to foster the digital transition. More in general, all the initiatives included in the NRRPs should be consistent with the so-called 'do no significant harm' principle, meaning that they should not support or carry out economic activities that do significant harm to any environmental objective of the Union. These objectives are defined in the Regulation establishing the *EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Investment*, a classification system establishing a list of environmentally sustainable economic activities entered into force in July 2020 ⁽¹³⁾. Furthermore, reforms and investments in the NRRPs are expected to contribute to the promotion and mainstreaming of the objectives of gender equality and equal opportunities for all.

As for the six pillars, particularly relevant to the *green transition* would be reforms and investments in green technologies and capacities, energy efficiency, building renovation and the circular economy (European Union 2021: recital 11) ⁽¹⁴⁾. These initiatives,

12. At the time of writing, 24 Member States have submitted their NRRPs and the European Commission has so far endorsed 12 of them (source: Commission's webpage on the Recovery and Resilience Facility - https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en - last accessed on 22 June 2021).

13. The environmental objectives of the Union defined in the EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Investment are: a) climate change mitigation; b) climate change adaptation; c) sustainable use and protection of water and marine resources; d) transition to a circular economy; e) pollution prevention and control; f) protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems.

14. Other environmental goals to which the NRRPs are expected to contribute include: the sustainable use and protection of water and marine resources, transition to a circular economy, waste prevention and recycling, pollution prevention control, and protection and restoration of healthy ecosystems, including forests, wetlands, peatlands and coastal areas, and the planting of trees and greening of urban areas (European Commission 2021a: 5).

while contributing to the Union's climate targets, are also expected to foster sustainable growth, creating jobs and preserving energy security (*ibid.*). The assessment of the contribution of specific actions in the NRRPs to EU-wide climate change and environmental objectives will be performed by the European Commission with the methodology for tracking climate-related expenditure and taking account of the EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Investment.

At least three pillars are particularly relevant to social policy goals. With regard to the *social and territorial cohesion* pillar, reforms and investments should contribute – among others – to fighting poverty and tackling unemployment, leading to the creation of high-quality and stable jobs, the inclusion and integration of disadvantaged groups, and should enable the strengthening of social dialogue, infrastructure and services, as well as of social protection and welfare systems (European Union 2021: recital 14).

Reforms and investments in *health, and economic, social and institutional resilience*, should aim – among others – to increase crisis preparedness and crisis response capacity, by improving the accessibility and capacity of health and care systems (*ibid.*: recital 15).

Finally, reforms and investments related to the pillar *next generation, children and youth* are considered as essential to promote education and skills, including digital skills, upskilling, reskilling and requalification of the active labour force, integration programmes for the unemployed; investment in access and opportunity for children and young people related to education, health, nutrition, jobs and housing; and policies that bridge the generational gap. These actions should ensure that the youngest segments of the population are not permanently affected by the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and that the generational gap is not further deepened (European Union 2021: recital 16).

The NRRPs are expected to be a 'comprehensive and adequately balanced response to the economic and social situation' of the Member States and should contribute to all the six pillars of the RRF, while also taking into account the specific challenges facing the Member State concerned (European Union 2021: recital 39). In order to assess the adequacy of the NRRPs, a set of criteria have been established, including their contribution to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and to the green and digital transitions (European Union 2021: recital 42).

3.2. The socio-ecological dimension of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility

All in all, both ecological challenges (especially climate-related ones) and social challenges appear central to the RRF, and the national plans are expected to provide responses to these challenges. In other words, EU recovery from the Covid-19 crisis is

expected to have strong ‘green’ and social dimensions. The question is whether and how, concretely, these two dimensions interact – i.e. to what extent is it possible to say that the RRF has a **socio-ecological dimension** – and, in particular, which **functions** are envisaged for national welfare states in what is expected to be a recovery based on the green transition (cf. Section 1.3)?

In this Section, we will provide an answer to these questions (as well as some concrete national policy examples included in the NRRPs), basing ourselves on an analysis of two documents directly related to the Recovery and Resilience Facility¹⁵ and of the Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission 2021b). In the latter document, published in March 2021, the European Commission has identified several initiatives related to the EPSR to be implemented in the years to come (including through the RRF), also in order to adapt European welfare states to the challenges related to the ‘twin’ green and digital transitions. Furthermore, the three headline targets on employment, training, and poverty and social exclusion identified by the Commission in the Action Plan (see Section 2.2) are also meant to guide Member States’ policies, including in the context of the NRRP.

3.2.1. Welfare states as a benchmark for the green transition

It emerges from our analysis that social issues are addressed in the documents related to the RRF in two ways: a) an explicit focus on specific target groups and social policy areas; and b) a more generic (even if reiterated) request for full implementation of the principles and rights of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Indeed, first, emphasis is placed on *target groups* such as children, young people, women and vulnerable groups, and frequent mention is made of a number of *social policy areas* – such as education and skills development, active labour market policies, the promotion of quality employment, healthcare, housing, and the promotion of gender equality and equal opportunities. In particular, the objectives of the promotion of gender equality and equal opportunities for all are to be mainstreamed in the NRRPs (i.e. across the six pillars, including the green transition and digital transformation), and the Member States should provide an explanation of how the measures included in their plans will contribute to those objectives (European Union 2021: art. 18.4 (o)); European Commission 2021a:10-11)¹⁶.

15. The Regulation establishing the Facility (European Union 2021) and the European Commission’s Staff Working Document providing guidance to the Member States for drafting their Recovery and Resilience Plans (European Commission 2021a).

16. The Member States are expected to outline the most important national challenges in terms of gender equality and equal opportunities for all, fully taking into account principles 2 and 3 of the EPSR, thus (European Commission 2021a:10-11): - ensuring and fostering equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men in all areas, including participation in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression; - ensuring the right to equal pay for work of equal value for women and men; - ensuring the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection, education, and access to goods and services available to the public regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation; - fostering equal opportunities of under-represented groups.

This said, second, the overall requirement is that the national Recovery and Resilience Plans should *contribute* to the implementation of the EPSR, i.e. – arguably – also taking into account principles and policy areas not explicitly mentioned in the RRF Regulation. In this respect, the Member States are asked to explain how their NRRPs (and specific components of those plans) would contribute to the implementation of the Pillar and, while reporting on the expected impact of the NRRPs, they are requested to use the indicators of the EPSR's Social Scoreboard. The contribution of the NRRPs to the implementation of the EPSR is indeed one of the criteria to be used by the Commission for the assessment of the plans (European Union 2021: recital 42 and art. 19c). In this sense, the EPSR and its Social Scoreboard are expected to act as a sort of benchmark to assess the social consequences of reforms and investments in the NRRPs.

This call for **social benchmarking** – arguably through the principles and rights of the EPSR – is also apparent in relation to reforms and investments specifically related to the green transition, with the Member States asked to justify how their plan 'supports actions in full respect of the climate and environmental priorities of the Union, while ensuring a just transition [...]' (European Commission 2021a:5). In particular, 'the social dimension of [the green and digital] transitions and their impact on equality should be factored in by Member States in the analysis of the impact of the reform proposals presented in their plans' (European Commission 2021a:15). In this sense, in the RRF there is an awareness that some initiatives promoting the green transition may enter into conflict with social objectives if the social and distributional consequences are not duly taken into account when designing investments and reforms.

This said, apart from stating this general principle, explicit references to aspects of the green transition for which the social implications should be more carefully considered, are more limited in the documents scrutinised (European Union 2021; European Commission 2021a, b). These include, first, reforms aimed at '*greening*' *fiscal systems*, for instance by shifting away from labour taxation into environmental taxation. While these kinds of reforms have the potential to stimulate employment, change behaviour in the direction of more sustainable consumption and production, and may have positive environmental and climate effects, they should also be designed taking into due consideration their possible distributional effects (European Commission 2021a:15) ⁽¹⁷⁾. Second, actions related to the *renovation of buildings and the promotion of energy efficiency* are explicitly linked to housing policies, including social housing and affordability, and energy poverty (European Commission 2021a:25). Third, consideration is given to investments in waste prevention and management and water re-use infrastructure, and to *environmental services for marginalised communities* (*ibid.*).

17. As further specified in the Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR, 'Taxation should be shifted away from labour to other sources more supportive to employment and in line with climate and environmental objectives, while protecting revenue for adequate social protection' (European Commission 2021b:18, italic added).

Box 2. Examples from NRRPs – Welfare states as a benchmark for the green transition

Belgium

The **renovation of buildings** is presented as one of the most prominent initiatives in the Belgian NRRP for achieving the transition towards climate neutrality, and the NRRP is expected to contribute fundamentally to the objective to cut greenhouse gas emissions in the building sector by 41% (Government of Belgium 2021:12; European Commission 2021d). The ‘renovation wave’ promoted by the NRRP will target both public and private buildings (including social housing) with poor energy performance (*ibid.*:46). In doing so, the Belgian government has committed to take into account the situation of low-revenue and vulnerable households, to make sure that they have access to building renovation schemes (*ibid.*: 47). This would help to alleviate energy poverty, since renovations are expected to reduce energy bills, which absorb a large proportion of the income of less wealthy households. While all Belgian regions and communities have proposed initiatives involving the renovation of buildings, some observers have highlighted in particular the Wallonia region’s commitment to allocate 30% of its recovery funds to upscaling the regional renovation wave efforts, dedicating a large share of these funds to public buildings and social housing (Climate Action Network 2021). In particular, initiatives planned in Wallonia explicitly state that the renovation wave will apply to social infrastructure such as social housing and childcare facilities (Government of Belgium 2021: 419). In this way, the region is seeking to combine the pursuit of environmental objectives (more energy efficient buildings) with the aim of meeting social objectives such as the right to housing and the right to access quality childcare.

Denmark

In June 2020, a broad coalition of parties in the Danish Parliament reached an agreement on a revisited Climate Action Plan, an instrument designed to guide the country’s economic recovery towards the energy transition (State of Green 2020). Among other initiatives, this politically binding Agreement contains a commitment to design a **green tax reform** (*ibid.*). In the Government’s plans, this reform will comprise two phases, both of which will be in part supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility: ‘phase 1 will take the initial steps of redirecting current energy taxes towards CO₂-emissions. Phase 2 will fundamentally rewrite the tax code by introducing a broad tax on all greenhouse gas emissions including the non-energy related emissions in the agricultural sector’ (Government of Denmark 2021: 117). Among other goals, the tax reform aims at immediate creation of jobs related to the green transition, on the assumption that companies will invest in more green and digital production capabilities to prepare for the increased carbon taxation (*ibid.*: 114). In order to be considered socio-ecological policies, green taxes need to include a social dimension. Introduced in 1992, Denmark’s Carbon Tax was already found to be socially regressive - especially for rural low-income households - to the point that the Tax had to be accompanied by reductions in labour taxes, in order to compensate for its regressivity (European Commission 2021e).

While details on implementation are still missing, the Danish NRRP expresses a certain awareness of the possible uneven distributional effects of the green tax reform, and the Danish government has undertaken to make sure that the reform considers ‘social equality’ (Government of Denmark 2021:116), achieving ‘massive cost effective reductions of greenhouse gas emissions, but in a socially just and balanced way’ (*ibid.*:118). In its assessment of the Danish NRRP, the European Commission takes note of the fact that – for the second phase of the green tax reform – ‘an expert group will draw up a roadmap for CO₂e taxation in a manner consistent with protecting competitiveness, *social balance* and minimal leakage’ (European Commission 2021f: 44, italics added).

Source: authors’ elaboration based on the sources quoted in the box.

3.2.2. Welfare states as enablers of the green transition

In the documents related to the RRF, as well as in the Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the importance of **active labour market policies, education, training and skills development policies** is strongly highlighted and **explicitly linked to the green transition** ⁽¹⁸⁾. Indeed, on the one hand, these policies – if duly designed – are expected to help to attenuate the negative effects of the Covid-19 crisis (and to reach the EU headline target on employment) and to endow the workforce with the skills needed for a ‘greener’ economy. In this respect, the NRRPs ‘should be the opportunity to promote a strong policy response for supporting a shift in employment policies from employment preservation to job creation and support to job transitions [...], in order to ease and accelerate structural changes (green and digital transitions)’ (European Commission 2021a: 5-6). This issue will be of crucial importance for the EU in the months to come, when the Member States will gradually discontinue emergency measures taken to support firms and workers during the pandemic, including job retention schemes such as short-time work schemes, wage subsidies, and dismissal bans (cf. Baptista *et al.* 2021). In addition to this, Member States are asked to ensure that the initiatives foreseen in the RRF are consistent with initiatives funded under EU cohesion policies and with national Just Transition Plans (see Section 2.1.3).

Reforms and investment particularly relevant to the green transition should include investments in upgrading skills, curricula reforms, setting up graduate tracking systems and modular vocational education and training programmes (European Commission 2021a: 25). In this respect, the Member States have been invited to give support to ‘quality job creation and employment’ through investments facilitating job-to-job transitions towards the green and digital sectors and to support restructuring in sectors most affected by the pandemic (European Commission 2021b). In doing so, social dialogue is presented as an essential element. Thus, the Member States are

18. In particular, in the ‘methodology for climate tracking’ annex to the RRF Regulation (European Union 2021: Annex VI), the highest coefficient for the calculation of support to climate change objectives (100%) has been attributed to measures in the NRRPs ‘contributing to green skills and jobs and the green economy’.

expected to design coherent policy packages to support labour market transitions, including (European Commission 2021c): a) hiring and transition incentives and support to entrepreneurship; b) comprehensive up-skilling and re-skilling strategies; and c) quality and effective employment services.

Besides underlining the key role that education and training policies can play in order to enhance workers' employability in a greener economy, in the EPSR's Action Plan the European Commission also highlights the importance of promoting environmental sustainability by integrating biodiversity and ecosystems in education and training curricula (European Commission 2021b:23).

Box 3. Examples from the NRRPs – Welfare states as enablers of the green transition

France

In terms of overall orientation, some observers have noted that the French Recovery package explicitly aims to combine social and ecological objectives (IDDRI 2020), proposing a vision that could be described as 'future-oriented and aiming for an ecological transition' (Mölter and Dethier 2021:1). While more in-depth analysis would be needed to assess the contribution that the specific measures included in the NRRP could make to achieving this vision, measures related to vocational training to support the ecological transition appear quite promising (*ibid.*:2). In this respect, the French NRRP provides substantial funding to training activities in what are presented as the '**strategic professions of tomorrow**', with an emphasis on a number of sectors deemed strategic for the national economy, including those closely related to the ecological transition (Mölter and Dethier 2021:2). In this respect, emphasis is placed on the need to strengthen public employment services and the national authority for vocational training and learning ('France compétences') on their capacity to identify current and future skill needs, on digitalisation of the training sector, and on initiatives targeted at young people, vulnerable groups and recipients of short-time work benefits (with a view to supporting the professional transition of the latter towards the 'strategic professions of tomorrow') (Government of France 2021). In particular, the French government pledges to prioritize professional training and education activities in sectors such as industry, transport and waste (*ibid.*: 585). In its assessment of the French NRRP, the European Commission has recognised, on the basis of the climate tracking methodology, the contribution that the new resources attributed to France compétences may make to achieving climate objectives (European Commission 2021g: 91).

Spain

Component no 10 of the Spanish NRRP (under the policy area ‘Fair and inclusive energy transition’) concerns the implementation of the Spanish **Just Transition Strategy (JTS)**. The JTS was adopted in 2019 as part of the country’s Strategic Energy and Climate Framework to achieve emission neutrality by 2050 (Government of Spain 2019) and it is intended to help meet the challenges of the transition towards climate neutrality, ensuring ‘that people and regions make the most of the opportunities offered by this transition, so that nobody is left behind’ (*ibid.*: 3). The Spanish JTS is closely linked to the Guidelines on just transition drawn up by the ILO (see Section 1.2.2): indeed, it can be considered as the first initiative following up on a strategic agreement to implement the ILO Guidelines signed in 2018 by the ILO itself and the Spanish government (Government of Spain 2019: 5). The Spanish NRRP envisages allocating € 300 million to the implementation of the JTS, corresponding to 0.4% of the total financial envelope of the NRRP (Government of Spain 2021). Investments contained in the just transition component are varied, and include investment aimed at promoting economic diversification and job creation, environment and infrastructure improvements, environmental restoration and upgrading of the areas concerned, and at supporting upskilling and reskilling of workers (European Commission 2021h: 80). The ultimate objective of the JTS is to promote an ecological transition which seeks to generate more and better jobs (Government of Spain, 2019: 5) and, in order to achieve this objective, emphasis is placed on implementing **a mix of active labour market policies, vocational training policies and social protection policies**. In particular, the JTS should be based on detailed analysis and monitoring of the status and trends of the labour market with regard to the ecological transition. This task is allocated to the Public Employment Service’s Occupations Observatory, which is expected to conduct regular analysis of the ecological transition in the different economic sectors, also with a view to identifying job creation opportunities, economic activities and occupations with better employment prospects, and the skills most in demand by businesses (Government of Spain 2019: 7). On this basis, ‘*active green employment and social protection policies*’ should be included in the Annual Employment Policy Plans, and ‘*green vocational training policies*’ should be developed, with a view to revising the curricula taught in compulsory secondary education, vocational training and higher education, adding contents relevant to the ecological transition (*ibid.*:8). These kind of policies should be included in specific Just Transition Agreements, to be developed at the territorial level in a participatory way (see Box 4).

Source: authors’ elaboration based on the sources quoted in the box.

3.2.3. Welfare states as buffers in the green transition

Reforms and investment linked to the RRF’s ‘social and territorial cohesion’ pillar are expected to contribute – among other things– to the creation of high-quality and stable jobs and to *strengthen Member States’ social protection and welfare systems* (European Union 2021: recital 14). As for social protection systems, in the

Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR, the European Commission highlights the need to ensure access to adequate social protection schemes for everybody, with a focus on categories of workers often excluded from effective access to those schemes, such as non-standard employees and some categories of self-employed. In addition to this, the Member States have been asked to take into account, when identifying reforms and investments in their NRRPs, the Country-specific Recommendations addressed to them in recent cycles of the European Semester. The latter also include recommendations pointing to the need to reinforce national social protection systems, including unemployment and minimum income schemes (cf. Rainone 2020).

In a just transition perspectives, these schemes would indeed be crucial to ensure workers' protection, representing a sort of **buffer in the green transition** (e.g., ensuring income protection during industrial restructuring processes). However, references to social protection systems in the EPSR's Action Plan and in key documents related to the RRF are **not explicitly linked to the green transition**¹⁹. As we have shown in the previous Section, in that context the focus is more on education and training policies and active labour market policies easing job transitions. For instance, with the exception of a reference to the specific situation of the self-employed, the role of social protection systems in the green transition is not addressed in the Commission Recommendation on an effective active support to employment following the Covid-19 crisis (European Commission 2021c)²⁰.

3.2.4. Welfare states as consensus-builders or conflict-management tools of the green transition

Reforms and investment linked to the RRF's 'social and territorial cohesion' pillar are expected to enable the strengthening of social dialogue in the Member States (European Union 2021: recital 14) and, in drafting their NRRPs, the Member States have been asked to report on how they conducted consultations with relevant national stakeholders, including the social partners and civil society organisations. Apart from this general requirement, no other references to the role of social and civic dialogue could be found in the documents linked to the RRF, **nor has stakeholder involvement been explicitly linked to the green transition process**.

Conversely, the *emphasis on social dialogue* is particularly strong in the EPSR's Action Plan, which recognises the important role to be played by the social partners in mitigating the impact of the pandemic, sustaining the recovery and managing future

19. As a consequence, differently than for the other functions of the welfare state discussed in this Section, we have not provided here a specific box with concrete policy examples from the NRRPs. However, also taking into account the limitations of the analysis of the national NRRPs illustrated in Annex 1, we cannot exclude the presence in the national plans of measures explicitly linking social protection schemes to the green transition.

20. Conversely, what is highlighted in the documents scrutinised is the need to make sure that the recovery is based on the creation of 'quality employment', ensuring fair working conditions and adequate wages.

changes in the labour market (European Commission 2021b: 36). The importance of social dialogue and of the need to involve the social partners in the decision-making and implementation process emerge particularly when it comes to ensuring ‘socially responsible restructuring’ (*ibid.*: 23) and defining policies aimed at job creation and job-to-job transition from declining sectors towards expanding sectors, such as the digital and green sectors (European Commission 2021b:16, 2021c).

Box 4. Examples from the NRRPs – Welfare states as consensus-builders or conflict-management tools of the green transition

France

The ‘Yellow Vests’ protests sparked in 2018 in France have revealed the magnitude and severity of potential socio-ecological conflicts and have drawn attention to the need to manage these in a participatory way. Protesters were, among other things, against the carbon tax proposed by the French government to achieve national objectives for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, due to its socially regressive nature. Following these protests, in 2019, the French government launched the **Citizens’ Convention on Climate**, with a view to gathering proposals for ways to achieve the government’s objective of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030, while simultaneously fostering social justice (Faure-Schuyer and Symon 2021:9). In 2020, the 150 members of this Convention – intended to represent the various components of French society – held an online session specifically aimed at drawing up policy proposals to influence France’s NRRP (Climate Home News 2020); these included a recommendation to the government to target recovery-related investments at the energy transition, while also making sure that investments are both socially acceptable and promote a more human and resilient model (*ibid.*). Eventually, in June 2020, the Citizens’ Convention on Climate published 149 proposals (Mölter and Dethier 2021:9), some of which involve substantial investments and subsidies, while also generating new tax revenues. Most of those proposals were initially backed by the French President Emmanuel Macron (Mölter and Dethier 2021:9). The final report by the Citizens’ Convention on Climate on the French draft NRRP was published in October 2020, acknowledging that the government has successfully reflected citizens’ calls to increase the country’s political ambitions concerning the ecological transition (Faure-Schuyer and Symon 2021:9). In its NRRP, the French government undertakes to propose a Climate and Resilience Law, expected to be a ‘key [...] reform to underpin the green transition’ (European Commission 2021g: 61), drawing specifically on some of the proposals put forward by the Citizens’ Convention on Climate (Government of France 2021: 741).

Spain

According to Heilmann *et al.* (2021), a positive element of the Spanish NRRP is the explicit emphasis placed on supporting less developed regions in the country, aligning recovery measures with territorial policies and with the objective to create more jobs and develop new economic activities. Particularly important in this respect is the attempt to link the national Just Transition Strategy (JTS) to the recovery (*ibid.*), including its implementation in the NRRP (Component 10) (see Box 3. for more details). One of the key features of the JTS is the promotion of participatory governance dynamics in defining territorial action and initiatives for a just transition, involving public actors at different levels, social partners, stakeholder organisations and citizens. In this respect, the main instrument is to be the elaboration of **Just Transition Agreements** based on ‘well-designed, transparent and inclusive processes, ensuring the extensive participation of the key stakeholders, with a view to building integrated regional development projects which maintain and promote new mid- to long-term employment and stimulate the Ecological Transition’ (Government of Spain 2019: 9). In light of the need to face the urgent employment challenges arising from the Spanish objective of phasing-out coal by 2025, the Spanish government restates its commitment in the NRRP to propose and implement Just Transition Agreements related to coal-mining regions and territories affected by power plant closures, with a view to supporting redundant workers and their communities and promoting the development of these territories (Government of Spain 2021: 253).

Source: authors’ elaboration based on the sources quoted in the box.

Conclusions

The main objectives of this report are to identify and to provide a preliminary assessment of the ‘socio-ecological dimension’ of the Covid-19 recovery as envisaged by the EU, also pointing to elements of continuity from key EU initiatives and strategies undertaken before the pandemic. With regard to the latter, we have in particular focused on the European Green Deal (the overarching EU growth strategy launched at the end of 2019) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (i.e. the main current EU reference framework in the domain of social policies). A **number of conclusions** can be drawn from our analysis.

First, an **attempt to re-orient EU policymaking** towards the objective of **linking environmental, economic, and social policies more closely** – with a view to creating synergies between the three policy areas and addressing possible trade-offs – was already apparent before the Covid-19 crisis. This ambition already characterised the European Green Deal, considered by the European Commission as a key part of the EU’s strategy to implement the UN Sustainable Development Agenda. In the EGD, the so-called socio-ecological nexus is addressed by reference to the notion of just transition, with an emphasis on supporting specific European territories and sectors that will be particularly affected by the green transition and on ensuring that the workforce has the right skills for a greener (and more digital) economy. At a more general level, a just transition should be ensured by fully implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. In the EGD, it is thus possible to identify the ambition to pursue a more balanced approach to development (compared to previous EU overarching strategies), combining an economic model based on green growth, with a focus on its possible social implications and on the need to ensure a just transition. Furthermore, in the EGD, the European Commission also recognises that – in order to fully identify and address the interlinkages between environmental, economic and social objectives and policies – a more integrated policy-making style overcoming a traditional ‘silos logic’ is needed. A first attempt to implement these key orientations of the EGD in the framework of EU socio-economic policy-making was made in the 2020 cycle of the European Semester, through a re-orientation of the process around the notion of competitive sustainability, (partial) integration of the SDGs, increasing involvement of EU Commission Directorate Generals responsible for environmental and climate policies,

and the inclusion of environmental sustainability among the key reform priorities for the Member States (alongside more traditional priorities related to social and economic policies).

Second, this **ambition to pursue a 'balanced approach'** to what we have labelled the eco-social-growth trilemma characterising the EGD appears to have **been taken on board in the EU strategy to recover from the Covid-19 crisis** and, notably the RRF. The primary objective of the RRF is indeed to guide the EU recovery from the Covid-19 crisis towards the promotion of the green (and digital) transitions in line with the European Green Deal, while also making these transitions with social cohesion, by ensuring a just transition. Thus, in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans, EU Member States are expected to implement policies contributing to both the climate and environmental objectives of the Union and to its social objectives. In particular, the just transition objective should be achieved both by implementing territorially targeted initiatives for the regions and sectors of the economy that are or are expected to be more affected by the green transition and by fully implementing the rights and principles constituting the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In this respect, and keeping in mind the four potential functions played by the welfare states in the green transition outlined in Section 1.3, the **benchmarking function** appears quite developed in the RRF – although not always explicitly so – and the EPSR is expected to be used by the Member States as a benchmark, allowing them to identify and address the social consequences of the policies for the green transition. Apart from this general requirement, however, only a few social policy considerations have been linked more directly and explicitly to the green transition in key documents related to the RRF and the NRRPs, notably: a) the distributional consequences of fiscal policies (in particular of shifting taxes from labour towards environmental taxation); b) housing and energy poverty, in the framework of the renovation wave for buildings and energy efficiency; and c) active labour market policies, education, training and skills development policies.

In particular, the role to be played by active labour market policies, education, training and skills development policies – which are at the core of what we have labelled the **enabling function** of the welfare state and which were already considered as key in the EGD – is greatly emphasised in the RRF and in other recent EU documents linked to the implementation of the EPSR. These policies are indeed considered as fundamental to facilitating the transition of the workforce towards a greener economy and attenuating the effects on employment of the gradual discontinuation of measures supporting firms and workers during the pandemic.

Conversely, the **buffer function** of the welfare state is less apparent in the RRF. To be clear, the national NRRPs will also contain reforms of social protection policies such as minimum income, unemployment and pensions: these policies had indeed been at

the centre of EU Country-specific Recommendations addressed to the Member States in previous years (which should serve as a basis for identifying reforms in the NRRPs) and their importance is also highlighted in recent EU initiatives and strategic documents such as the Action Plan for the implementation of the EPSR. This said, unlike social investment policies, social protection policies are not explicitly linked to the green transition in the context of the recovery.

Similarly, the **consensus building/conflict management function** of welfare states within the ecological transition is left implicit in key documents related to the RRF. Although the need to involve citizens and stakeholders in policymaking is a constitutive part of the notion of just transition to which the RRF repeatedly refers, the only requirement for the Member States in this respect is to report, in their NRRPs, on the consultation process leading to the elaboration of the plans. This said, an explicit focus on the importance of the role to be played by social partners in the transition towards a greener economy does emerge from other relevant documents related to the implementation of the EPSR.

To sum up, the RRF – building on and further developing initiatives already launched before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – explicitly recognises the need to address interlinkages between environmental and social policies in the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. It aims to promote a ‘balanced recovery’ in the EU, combining green growth with the promotion of a just transition based on a guarantee of high social standards. This said, **a number of shortcomings, limitations and risks** potentially constraining this aim can be detected and need further scrutiny.

First, the very **feasibility** of an approach based on the simultaneous achievement of economic (i.e. GDP) growth, environmental protection and social progress has been questioned. For many observers, such an approach – already at the basis of the EGD – is not sufficient to address either the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation, or those deriving from increasing social inequalities (see, for instance, Laurent 2021). While alternative strategies based on de-growth are not on the current institutional agendas of the EU and of its Member States, a joint proposal by the European social partners to develop a set of indicators to measure economic, social and environmental progress beyond GDP was discussed during the recent Porto Social Summit and ‘welcomed’ by EU Heads of State and Government (Council of the EU 2021).

Second, a number of observers have questioned the actual **compatibility of the economic activities** considered as ‘green’ in the framework of the RRF **with the achievement of climate-change and ecological objectives**. Criticisms have particularly targeted the EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Investment (a key instrument to identify ‘green’ private investment and to select ‘green’ investments in the Member States’ NRRPs), pointing out that, on the one hand, it includes a number of economic activities whose

impact on the environment is questionable, thus entailing the risk of ‘greenwashing’ and, on the other hand, that it does not adequately take into account the social sustainability of these investments (cf. Fronteddu 2020; Sabato and Fronteddu 2020) ⁽²¹⁾. As for the latter, the European Commission has been studying the feasibility of possible extensions of the EU Taxonomy to cover sustainability objectives better, including social ones (European Commission 2021b: 34).

Third, while the promotion of a balanced approach is a promising step, it is yet to be seen **how such an approach will be implemented in practice by the Member States** in their NRRPs and by the European Commission in its assessment of these plans. In particular, some observers have pointed out that certain draft or final NRRPs already submitted to the Commission would miss the 37% climate spending target and that, in some cases, measures looking ‘green’ at first glance may end up supporting fossil fuels (cf. Wuppertal Institute and E3G 2021). In addition to this, preliminary assessments of available (published or draft) NRRPs point to the need to ensure better complementarity between measures in the NRRPs, measures financed by other EU funds and national initiatives, partly to avoid a situation where the latter are not in line with EU environmental and climate objectives (cf. Pilati 2021).

Fourth, more in general, **assessment** by EU institutions of Member States’ **NRRPs and monitoring** of their implementation, will be crucial to ensure the coherence of the plans and their consistency with the RRF’s economic, environmental and social objectives. This will not be an easy task, given the complexity of the governance of the RRF and the need to check the measures contained in the NRRPs (and the whole plans) against a number of criteria, scoreboards and taxonomies (cf. Corti and Núñez Ferrer 2021). As shown in the previous sections, the RRF aims to link environmental, social, and economic objectives, including addressing the possible social consequences of the green transition. However, first, a unifying framework building bridges between the six pillars of the RRF is somehow missing. In the European Semester 2020, there was a first attempt to link EU socio-economic governance more closely to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to the SDGs, as a unifying framework for the integration of economic, environmental and social objectives, a circumstance also leading to some progress in the development of a more coordinated style of ‘eco-social’ policy-making. While the RRF also builds on the notion of competitive sustainability, the role of the UN 2030 Agenda and of the SDGs as unifying policy frameworks guiding policy-making appears less central (although not absent) in the RRF.

Fifth, when it comes to linking the green transition to social policies, there could be the risk of an excessively **narrow interpretation of the notion of just transition**, i.e. of a focus on support to specific territories and economic sectors and on those policies

21. For an overview of the most often used approaches for tracking climate expenditure (including the EU Taxonomy) and a discussion of their respective advantages and limitations, see Nesbit *et al.* (2021).

instrumental to the transition (such as active labour market policies and skills development), potentially at the expense of more traditional social protection policies (such as unemployment and minimum income benefits, pensions). This sort of prioritization (already apparent in key documents related to the RRF) could increase in the years to come, when pressure on the Member States to address high levels of public deficit and debt provoked by the Covid-19 crisis will become stronger. In this respect, it seems crucial to ensure that the NRRPs really contribute to the full implementation of the EPSR and to strengthen the role of the latter as a social benchmark for the green transition. This said, on the one hand, a specific amount of expenditure has been earmarked for the promotion of the green and digital transitions in the NRRPs and, on the other hand, macro-economic and fiscal objectives to be pursued through the Plans are backed, in EU governance, by binding mechanisms and procedures to ensure compliance by the Member States. Given the lack of quantitative targets for expenditure on social policies, and of binding mechanisms to ensure Member States' implementation of the EPSR, ensuring and monitoring the pursuit of social objectives in the implementation of the NRRPs may prove to be more difficult than for objectives related to other policy domains.

Finally, *sixth*, in this report we have not addressed the issue of the **global dimension of a just transition**, i.e. the interlinkages between decisions taken at different territorial levels, including the consequences that decisions taken at the EU level as part of the recovery may have on other countries, especially developing countries. While a few references to this aspect can be found in some of the documents analysed here, a thorough analysis of this issue should include consideration of strategies and initiatives relating to policy areas not investigated in the present report, such as EU trade policy, foreign and security policy, the EU consensus on development, and EU open strategic autonomy. More in general, a strengthened link between the RRF and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development would help to make sure that EU and national initiatives for recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic are consistent with and contribute to the objective of achieving a just and sustainable recovery at the global level.

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Annex 1. Methodological choices and implications for the research

The main objectives of this report are to identify, describe and provide a preliminary assessment of ‘the socio-ecological dimension’ of the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis as envisaged by the European Union. Besides considering relevant contributions from the scientific literature and from stakeholder organisations, this has been primarily done through a careful content-analysis of key policy and legislative documents published by EU institutions (most of them, by the European Commission). A number of details should be added here on the methodological choices made by the research group and on the implications that these choices may have for the findings of the research. In particular, some information should be provided on the criteria for the selection of the documents considered, the criteria for their analysis, and the nature of these documents.

First, regarding the selection of documents, since the ‘EU recovery’ from the Covid-19 pandemic is the topic of this report, our starting point has been the documents directly related to the principal and most innovative recovery instrument, i.e. the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility. An analysis of these documents (in particular, the EU Regulation on the RRF) has allowed us to identify what we have defined as the ‘EU Reference frameworks for a socio-ecological transition’, i.e. a number of strategies and initiatives that – even if launched before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – have strongly informed the contents and orientations of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, including its socio-ecological dimension. As they are presented as the reference frameworks for the orientations and provisions in the facility, these strategies and initiatives – which include the European Green Deal and related sectoral strategies, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Semester – have been deemed by the research team to be the most relevant texts to identify and fully understand the socio-ecological dimension of the EU recovery as envisaged in the RRF ⁽²²⁾. This said, a variety of other

22. In other words, in the selection of the documents for the analysis, we have proceeded backwards, i.e. using the most recent documents (those related to the RRF) to identify documents published in previous years, yet still relevant to our research. However, when referring to the various documents in the report, we have preferred to follow, as much as possible, the chronological order of their publication, in order to facilitate the readers’ understanding of the dynamics and how these have evolved over time.

strategies and initiatives, besides those considered in this report, are also mentioned in the RRF, and an analysis of those strategies and initiatives might reveal other elements relevant to the socio-ecological dimension of the EU recovery not included in the present report. Similarly, several EU sectoral strategies potentially containing provisions linking environmental and social policies – but not mentioned in the RRF – have not been included in this report.

Second, the analysis of the documents eventually selected has been conducted at two levels. First, a broad analysis of the various documents was performed, aimed at understanding and describing their contents and at setting them in a broader policy context. Second, a more in-depth analysis was conducted of the parts of those documents with an explicit socio-ecological dimension, i.e. addressing simultaneously social and environmental objectives and challenges (either at the normative level or through specific policies, programmes or instruments).

Third, many of the documents analysed are strategic, political and programmatic in nature. These documents define principles, orientations and guidelines to be further specified through follow-up (legislative or non-legislative) initiatives. This is, for instance, the case of sectoral strategies linked to the European Green Deal or of the European Pillar of Social Rights. In these cases, while we have undertaken an in-depth analysis of the main documents delineating the various strategies and have identified their socio-ecological dimension (if any), it has obviously not been possible in the context of the present research to analyse all the related follow-up initiatives. An analysis of the latter could complement our research, strengthening or nuancing our findings. Furthermore, while in this report we have identified the main features of the socio-ecological dimension of the EU recovery as *envisaged* by EU documents, an analysis of the implementation (at both the EU and national/regional levels) of these initiatives will be key to assess whether and how the approach ‘on paper’ will also be applied ‘in reality’.

Similarly, one implication of the strategic and programmatic nature of the documents hereby analysed is that, while they are extremely useful to illustrate the general approaches and orientations that should guide the policies for the socio-ecological transition as defined by the EU, in some cases these documents might seem rather abstract, and it might not be immediately clear how they could be applied in specific policies and programmes at the national level. For this reason, we have included in the report boxes summarising some **examples of concrete policy initiatives** linking environmental and social policies, included (or mentioned) by EU countries in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans. The initiatives reported can be considered as *illustrative* of the various functions that can be performed by welfare states during the green transition. However, these national examples cannot be totally representative and comprehensive, mainly due to the criteria used to select them.

Indeed, in order to select relevant initiatives, our starting point has not been the NRRPs themselves, for two reasons. First, a comprehensive analysis of these plans with a view to identifying 'good practices' for the socio-ecological transition would have gone far beyond the scope of the present research. Second, such a comprehensive analysis would not have been feasible due to time and language constraints (most of the NRRPs were submitted in April 2021 and most plans are written in the national languages). Consequently, in our attempt to identify illustrative policy examples, we have followed a three-step-approach. First, we have started by examining available analyses of the NRRPs (or draft NRRPs) and repositories of concrete policy initiatives (in English) made available by (networks of) research institutes, think tanks, civil society organisations⁽²³⁾. Second, we selected a few initiatives that we considered to be particularly useful to illustrate socio-ecological policies in the NRRPs, drawing from those cases that one (or, preferably, several) of our sources had presented as good or promising practices. In doing so, we have considered only initiatives included in NRRPs written in a language accessible to the research team and for which an official endorsement by the European Commission was available⁽²⁴⁾. Third, we cross-checked information on the selected initiatives provided by our sources against the actual texts of the NRRPs concerned and of the related Commission's assessments.

As mentioned above, while our research strategy has allowed us to provide concrete examples of national initiatives illustrating our findings, it obviously has some limitations in terms of comprehensiveness and representativeness of the sample of practices included in this report. First, given the need to cross-check information gathered from indirect sources against the text of the NRRPs, we have been forced to exclude practices implemented in countries for which none of the research team speaks the national language(s). Surely, interesting practices have emerged also in other EU countries not mentioned in this report. Second, the practices included in the report cannot be considered as an indication of the socio-ecological dimension of the NRRPs of the countries to which they refer. A global assessment of the NRRPs' socio-ecological dimension would require broader and more in-depth research.

23. Some analyses have been particularly useful for the present research, including the ones elaborated in the framework of : a) the 'Green Recovery Tracker' set-up by the Wuppertal Institute and E3G (<https://www.greenrecoverytracker.org/>); b) the campaign 'Rethink the Recovery' coordinated by Finance Watch and involving a diverse coalition of non-profit organisations, consumer groups, trade unions and think tanks (<https://rethinktherecovery.org/en#home>); c) the campaign 'EU Cash Awards' organised by Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe (<https://www.cashawards.eu/>).

24. At the time of the finalisation of the present research, the European Commission had assessed and endorsed the NRRPs of 13 Member States, notably Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain (https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/recovery-and-resilience-plans-assessments_en - last accessed on 01 July 2021).



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