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# Towards a Sustainable Welfare System? The Challenges and Scenarios of Eco-social Transitions

by Roberta Cucca, Yuri Kazepov and Matteo Villa

## TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE WELFARE SYSTEM? THE CHALLENGES AND SCENARIOS OF ECO-SOCIAL TRANSITIONS

In the last fifteen years, we have witnessed the development and subsequent major growth of the literature on the role of welfare policies in the ecological crisis and the so called green transition. Concepts such as sustainable welfare, just transition, eco-social policies and eco-social justice, to name just a few, have been used to portray the need for a paradigm shift. This has led some scholars to acknowledge the urgency to challenge the current unsustainable growth model and to investigate how sustainable welfare policies should address societal needs within ecological limits and from an intergenerational and global perspective. The paper highlights the foundations, challenges and current research gaps in the literature on sustainable welfare, such as empirical weaknesses; uncertainty and ambiguity; the complexity of multilevel governance arrangements; and the emerging inequalities associated with the green transition. It also introduces the main topics discussed and analysed in the six contributions collected in the Focus: *Towards a Sustainable Welfare System? The Challenges and Scenarios of Eco-social Transitions* published of the Journal Politiche Sociali/Social Policies. The Focus is gathering contributions from both Italian and international researchers belonging to different disciplinary communities and providing an interesting contribution to the debate.

**KEYWORDS** *Ecological crisis and transition, complexity, sustainable welfare, eco-social policy, multi-level governance, contextuality.*

## 1. Introduction

The social policy literature has often described the last two decades as a period marked by the so-called double crisis of Western welfare systems

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(Taylor-Gooby 2013). Demands for social protection have increased due to the changing configuration of old social risks and the emergence of new ones. On the other hand, the fiscal crisis resulting from the states' responses to the 2008 economic downturn and the consequences of the more recent pandemic have reduced the room for public policy manoeuvre (Farnsworth and Irving 2012; Béland *et al.* 2021)<sup>1</sup>. These two contradictory dynamics spiralled into one another, posing complicated political dilemmas that have been addressed in different ways across countries and policy domains through strategies of expansion or, more frequently, recalibration or retrenchment (Ferrera *et al.*, 2000; Häusermann, 2012).

The design and implementation of such strategies have remained mostly entrenched either in neo-Keynesian or neoliberal ideas of welfare capitalism that have characterized the past decades, thereby making the contradictions of a welfare model dependent on an environmental destructive economic growth more evident (Büchs and Koch 2017). The emerging dilemmas between the increasing demands of social protection, fiscal crises, and new social risks produced by the diversified impacts of climate change, pollution and destruction of habitats and biodiversity, and impoverishment of soils and natural resources further challenge the welfare state (Johansson *et al.* 2016; Gough 2017). Climate change in some cases threatens health and access to natural resources. It also undermines the sustainability of the most exposed local economies and aggravates already vulnerable communities vis-à-vis health, poverty, inequality, and human security (IPCC 2018, 2020, 2023), boosting displacement and migration processes (IDMC 2021). In the long run, it might be endangering the sustainability of employment-insurance models.

Even mitigation and adaptation policies, as the main strategies of the so-called ecological transition, may easily have strong social implications. These might be due to the potential regressive effects of fiscal measures; the rising costs of energy sources and consumption goods; the decline, transformation, and innovation of certain types of production and infrastructure (e.g. housing, mobility, food); and related industries and jobs. Also, the growing inability of social policies to include the most vulnerable involved in these processes – unless synergies are addressed – is a major challenge that the current institutional transition strategies of the European Union (e.g. the European Green Deal) are trying to face by aiming at «Leaving No One Behind». This is also the reason why the current crisis may be defined as a *triple sustainability crisis* of welfare capitalist systems, namely a condition

<sup>1</sup> The European Commission has tried to counteract this by providing member states with the largest recovery package ever approved of € 2,018 trillion for the period 2021-2027 (European Union 2021), Spain and Italy acquiring the largest shares.

whereby economic, social, and environmental aspects interact with and fuel one another, and where previous welfare adaptation strategies may appear outdated, ineffective and somewhat paradoxical, and so at risk of severely worsening the ecological crisis (Villa 2020). For instance, while retrenchment measures may increase inequality and deprivation, exposing weaker people, groups and communities to massive new social risks of environmental origin, current modes of recalibration strategies, additional state expenditures, or any policy aimed at creating/saving jobs in environmentally impactful sectors risk strengthening the welfare growth-dependence model, thereby enhancing the emergence of social-environmental risks. As a matter of fact, in this deeply changing scenario, the same paradigms of welfare capitalism, including the more recent social investment (Hemerijck 2017), may prove inadequate to account for ecological limits (Gough 2014; Koch and Mont 2016).

*In search of new paradigms, conceptual clarity, and the need for further research*

In the last fifteen years, we have witnessed the development and subsequent major growth of the literature on the role of welfare policies and social work in the ecological crisis and transition. Concepts such as sustainable welfare, just transition, eco-social policies and eco-social justice, to name just a few, have been used to portray the need for a paradigm shift and have led some scholars to acknowledge the need to challenge the current unsustainable growth model and investigate how sustainable welfare should address societal needs within ecological limits and from an intergenerational and global perspective (Koch and Mont 2016, 5). These authors point out that reducing the dependence of welfare policies on growth is necessary and that changing approaches and reducing measures supporting growth might be critical to this aim. However, reducing is not merely overseeing neoliberal cuts, but rather recalibrating expenditure towards post-growth economic models which emphasize notions of efficiency and sufficiency, as well as the substitution of more with less impacting energy sources (Schaffrin 2014, 7-8). This poses several dilemmas related to labour and wage distribution, welfare funding and costs of the transition, and structural, behavioural and political barriers and dependencies which need to be addressed. Other studies consider the evolution of the European policy context (e.g. Laurent, 2021a; Akgüç *et al.*, 2022), the link between welfare and labour transformations in the ecological transition (Benegiamo *et al.*, 2023), and the possible actualization of eco-social welfare regimes to be compared with the classical European social welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999),

either embracing or criticizing the synergy hypothesis<sup>2</sup> (Zimmerman and Graziano 2020; García-García *et al.* 2022). Other contributions, moving from the concept of just transition, analyse the different patterns by which transformations in production on the ground are being accompanied by more or less anticipatory and more or less transformative policies to reduce employment risks, ensure continuity of income if not work, or even support an economic transformation (e.g. Krawchenko and Gordon 2021; Galgóczi 2022). Finally, several works (e.g. Gough 2017, 2021; Anguelovski *et al.* 2018; Bouzarovski *et al.* 2018; Nicli *et al.* 2020; Büchs 2021; Corlet Walker *et al.* 2021; Laurent 2021b) insist on the need for a fundamental reorientation of social policies identifying some possible main strategies like: 1) investing in preventive social policy (education, healthcare, urban planning); 2) promoting economic equality through minimum and maximum income caps, time-banking, and shifting the tax base of welfare states from work towards capital, financial transactions, and ecologically damaging goods; 3) meeting citizens' basic needs through universal basic services and voucher schemes and work-time reduction; 4) developing green employment through sectoral shifts, sustainable workers' rights, and climate insurances; or 5) favouring synergies between green renewal, ecological retrofitting, energy poverty alleviation, and housing affordability interventions.

To date, however, there remains a limited focus in the literature on empirical cases for the analysis of ecological transition, distributive effects, social risks and policies to counter them (Mandelli *et al.* in this Focus). Such research explores the first measures implemented by the EU (*ibidem*); macro-scenarios of eco-social change based on simulations (D'Alessandro *et al.* 2021); the relationship between growth and welfare – either in general or addressing specific measures to boost the ecological transition in a post-growth scenario (Büchs 2021; Corlet Walker and Jackson 2021; Koch 2021) – and citizens' attitudes, expectations and ideas for change towards a sustainable welfare (Fritz and Koch 2019). In a few cases, studies explore the territorial dimension of the nexus between welfare and environment (Bonetti 2023; Villa 2023; Carrosio and De Vidovich in this Focus), discussing the emerging context-based eco-social risks for different actors (workers, citizens, firms and public institution), the possible conflicts between them, and the way to address these by way of more or less combined top-down and bottom-up strategies, policies and mobilizations. In particular, there appears to be a lack of studies concerning transition processes on the ground and the actual and potential role of eco-social policies and eco-social work (Matthies and Närhi 2017; Matutini

<sup>2</sup> According to this hypothesis, there is a synergy between welfare regimes and environmental policy models in different countries.

*et al.* 2023), looking at the lessons to be learned from the possible emerging trade-offs, conflicts or synergies between different processes and actors.

As a matter of fact, the ecological crisis and the ongoing (still uncertain) transition presents a profoundly diversified and complex challenge. In particular, understanding the nexus between social and environmental issues requires considering broader analytical approaches both to address the higher level of complexity of the issues at stake and to include the environment and time in the equation (Samimian-Darash 2011; Walker and Cooper 2011; Johansson *et al.* 2016, 98 ss.; Stehr and Machin 2019). Moreover, unlike other social risks, the ones of environmental origin are not only individually but, in many cases, also collectively unpredictable. For these reasons, in order to address present and future scenarios, research needs to blend social and environmental policies analysis while dealing with multiple scales (Eriksen 2016), problems of synchronization, and trade-offs between social security and environmental protection. This seems particularly crucial considering several specific angles. Firstly, the recent stress test kicked-off by the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the contradictions of the current growth model, requiring at the same time urgent and forward-looking measures and perspectives. Secondly, there are ongoing transformations in important economic sectors such as automotive, food, fashion and energy systems, where social effects are taking place on multiple scales from global to local. Thirdly, the unpredictable interaction between the ecological crises and the ongoing transformation processes are increasing the need for an integrated analysis of the very basis of our livelihood and wellbeing.

## 2. A new field of research? Foundations and criticalities

The present Focus of *Politiche Sociali/Social Policies* constitutes a good albeit admittedly incomplete overview of the current state of the debate on the topic, gathering contributions from both Italian and international researchers coming from, or pertaining to, different scientific communities. In particular, the papers engage the subjects of sustainable welfare (Koch *et al.*) and the related emerging eco-social policies, both with regard to the first measures put in place by the European Union (Mandelli *et al.*) and the adaptation of measures against classical social risks in the framework of the ecological transition (Natali *et al.*). In addition, there are contributions that look at the territorial dimension of eco-social policies, with particular attention to their participatory dimension (Carrosio and De Vidovich; Koch *et al.* both herein) and the role of social work (Volturo). Finally, the Focus includes a contribution to the classic policy debate on the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor and the risks of new social inequalities and dynamics

of stigmatization and blaming which may emerge in the transition scenario (Ruser). Hence the value of the Focus lies in relating different approaches and analyses that have so far been separate, showing what is in progress, some advances and limitations, and future research perspectives, providing further stimulus to the debate in the Italian and European context.

Still, there are some issues that deserve to be discussed: empirical weaknesses, uncertainty and ambiguity of the processes; the complexity of multilevel governance arrangements; and the emerging inequalities.

### *Empirical weakness*

The novelty of this field of inquiry and the empirical weakness characterizing it are partly a consequence of lacking explicit eco-social policies. Indeed, the object of inquiry is far from being consolidated in most countries. Therefore, scholars look at the strategies and first attempts put in place by institutional and social actors to design both top-down and bottom-up new eco-social measures, to adapt the ones at their disposal, or to implement specific projects and experiments. Some analyses are more prospective, deductive-based forms of understanding of possible future eco-social policies or political paradigms applications and their consequences. Finally, some introduce a few normative hypotheses about how a sustainable welfare may, should or could work in a post-growth or otherwise conceived new socio-economic model. The interest of these contributions for deepening our understanding of eco-social challenges and possible answers is certain but also points to the need to clarify and distinguish the diverse approaches – for example, the differences between ontological and epistemological premises and middle-range theories, the role of ethical and normative considerations, political and scientific aspects of the issues at stake, and the role of philosophical and ideological assumptions in devising possible sustainable futures.

Overall, the challenges to be tackled in continuing the research efforts in this area concern which effective qualitative-quantitative methods of inquiry are needed to study an object in the process of being defined, whose analytical-conceptual boundaries have not yet been settled, and which as yet takes shape in a fragmented and asynchronous manner in a scenario of uncertainty, and how to apply them. They also relate to the need to connect domains and disciplines (ecological, social, economic, technological) that are still mostly separated in terms of languages, methods, theoretical frameworks, institutional structures, and modes of delimiting objects (despite Ian Gough's 2016 appeal). On this point, it is important to note the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds of those dealing with the topic, to date comprising economic, political and regional sociologists, political scientists, institutional

and ecological economists, scholars in social work, social movements, and organizational and participatory processes. If, on the one hand, such diversity constitutes a source of development of this field of inquiry, on the other hand it may not be enough unless the field turns into a learning process involving the disciplines that investigate natural cycles and the ecological crisis, as well as technological and organizational innovations. Specific efforts aimed at building trans-scientific paradigms are needed, such as the case of cybernetics and systems thinking in the past, or of more recent so-called post-normal science, even possibly drawing inspiration from them. The fragmentation of the field in which this process should potentially unfold requires consideration: firstly, the implementation so far of so-called eco-social policies in local and regional welfare systems is diversified, fragmented and still poorly mapped; secondly, the possible presence of sorts of eco-social measure does not necessarily follow from an explicit eco-social framework, institutional design, strategy or programming; and thirdly, the very definition of eco-social policy in the literature is not necessarily established and agreed upon, and any attempt to design a conceptual or organizational-institutional typology – e.g. for comparing eco-social systems across countries and territories – is necessarily provisional and incomplete (Mandelli 2022; Villa 2023).

#### *How to address uncertain and ambiguous processes*

The need to establish a research field capable of dealing with the increasingly urgent challenges and stringent conditions of the ecological crisis (Persson *et al.* 2022) depends on researchers' ability to cope with the uncertainty and ambiguity (Weick 1995) of the crisis itself and the changing scenarios. This is partly due to the transition strategies adopted and shifts taking place at various levels more or less related to them (e.g. geopolitical, economic- or market-based, technological, sector-specific, organizational and behavioural, as well as related to values, attitudes and emotions; see, for example, Joy 2021).

The *uncertainty* of scenarios is a structuring factor in a transition of this magnitude, not least because of the limited possibility of understanding and predicting the systemic interactions between the complexity of ecological dynamics and the plurality of decision-making processes and ensuing transformations taking place at different levels. Size, temporal dynamics, and complexity shape what some authors (Levin *et al.* 2012) call a «super-wicked problem» and, hence, a context within which it is difficult to develop predictive landscapes that experts in different fields manage to outline in a biased and often contested manner. Combined with uncertainty arising from the possible insufficient availability of data, knowledge, and expertise, there is *ambiguity*, given by a condition in which interpretations of the present are necessarily



manifold and visions of the future predictably divergent and divisive, and the issues under discussion, whether environmental, economic, occupational, cultural, etc., easily confuse. Uncertainty and ambiguity therefore shape the general phenomenology of the ecological crisis and transition, but also characterize specific processes proper to sectors and/or territories, fuelling conflicts of many kinds (Benegiamo *et al.* 2023).

In the present Focus and the relevant literature, combinations of uncertainty and ambiguity appear more as background elements that are seldom discussed. The environmental argument is in many cases reduced to the implicit cause behind the social implications of the transition, overlooking any ecological understanding (Harries-Jones 1995) and disregarding the epistemological roots of the ecological crisis. Once again, there is a risk of treating society as being external to the environment and vice versa (Stehr and Machin 2019), and of recreating the customary separation between knowledge domains. It is therefore of particular importance that at least two of the contributions herein move from the IPCC report data to unfold their own specific inquiry (Koch *et al.*; Natali *et al.* both herein). It is equally interesting that the resulting scenario implications, even considering the diversity of the essays' goals and contents, appear highly divergent.

Some recent research shows that knowledge itself constitutes a sort of «battleground», or at least an underlying factor in ongoing conflicts at various levels, from specific territorial contexts (Villa 2023) to the global scale (Mann 2021; Supran and Oreskes 2021). Here expert findings and insights enter debates, interact with other views, opinions and concerns, and contribute, despite the experts' own intentions, to fuel controversies. In such contexts, expert knowledge from different sources – political, cultural and normative views, identities and emotional ties to social and natural contexts and phenomena – all contribute to a rough and complex landscape (Room 2011). There, difficulties in promoting governance processes and accessible spheres of participation, dialogue and communication produce situations in which differences crystallize into irreconcilable positions where discussion at times takes the form of soliloquies (Weick 1977). Hence, the case for transition strategies may end up relying on weak scenarios due to the difficult integration between knowledge and policy fields, the weakness of politics, and the ability and/or legitimacy of some actors to impose choices due to asymmetrical power positions. And yet, as many experts maintain, the choices are and will remain political; they need, however, to be based on scientific data and must consider other social and cultural aspects, including citizens' concerns.

Eco-social policies take shape in these contexts, helping to shape them and steering their transformations. How and with what outcome depends on their political and institutional design, related governance processes, and the latter's ability to foster successful interactions with the complexity outlined

above, and on ideas and practices of translation, adaptation, enactment and assembling while moving across contexts and from decision-making to implementation (Clarke *et al.* 2015). Hence, the study of eco-social policies from the perspective of sustainable welfare can effectively take its cue from the contributions to this Focus to explore further and understand the problems of complexity being raised.

### *The multilevel governance of environmental and social policies*

Analysing social and environmental policies through spatial and territorial lenses adds a layer of complexity and poses some analytical challenges that require some conceptual re-alignment, in particular when the two enter into a dialogue and there is the need to understand their relationship and mutual entanglements. For a long time, social policy scholars – with some notable exceptions (Ferrera 2005; McEwen and Moreno 2005; Kazepov 2010; Keating 2020) – did not consider scales as a relevant perspective to understand the social policy dynamic. The nation state was the main actor and lens through which to analyse the welfare state and its impact on social stratification and on the living conditions for individuals and families. Only in recent decades has the territorial perspective gained momentum. There are many reasons for this change, ranging from globalizing economic processes weakening nation states' control over redistributive processes (Crouch *et al.* 2001) to decentralization processes and territorial restructuring offloading responsibilities to lower tiers of government (Kazepov 2008), from the rising role of the European Union in constraining nation states' action (Olsen 1997) to the increasing role of local in-kind provisions and their redistributive impact (Verbist and Matsaganis 2014), just to name some (Kazepov *et al.* 2022). For environmental policies, the scale of reference was always inherently more articulated and went beyond the borders of the nation state: from the first attempts to find agreement on limiting emissions in Kyoto (1997) to the Paris Agreement (2015), the transnational character of the issues at stake was clear enough, as were the national and subnational implications. Addressing the relationship between social and environmental policies aimed at disentangling the territorial implications of those relationship requires us to understand how the different levels talk to one another and what are the specific implications for policies designed at whichever level. Considering the different nature of the policies, the different dynamic through which they develop, the more or less binding character of the measures implemented at different levels, and the differently rooted legitimacy of the measures developed, we need to disentangle some analytical elements at a more abstract level. In this regard, we consider it fruitful to identify four key elements (Kazepov *et al.* 2022): firstly, sovereignty – i.e. the jurisdictions and

borders within which it is possible to define binding agreements, sanctionable in case of non-compliance; secondly, policies – i.e. specific single measures, their design, and the regulatory principles they relate to; thirdly, the contextual conditions, whether socio-economic, socio-demographic or ecological; and fourthly, politics, the logic of political action and the actors involved at the different levels. It is from the relationality and synergies among these four key elements that we are able to identify quite different patterns of multilevel arrangements with scalar and multi-actor implications. When we relate these two policy fields, these four analytical elements refer to different jurisdictions, use very different policy measures, relate to different contextual conditions, follow (at least partly) different logics, and address conflicts in very different ways. Even their acceptance in the population and the sentiment of «deservingness» they mobilize is different, as comparative research has shown (Maione *et al.* 2021).

1) *Sovereignty* pertains to the territorial organization of regulatory jurisdictions – in particular, to the way in which legitimacy and power are distributed within multilevel institutional arrangements. At least since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), sovereignty pertains to the nation state. Subnational bodies can be passive receivers of policies defined at national level or more active actors with some degree of freedom within their own jurisdictions, defined by administrative boundaries, to design, finance, manage and implement specific policies in federal systems. Both social and environmental policies follow multilevel arrangements, even though the two do not necessarily match. Environmental policies are more likely to cross physical and political borders, while social policies are more bound, by solidarity and legitimacy, to a political community and a controlled territory. This implies that environmental policies require more international efforts and cross-jurisdictional agreements than social policies do. Not by chance, the European Union has stronger competences in the first (as the paper by Mandelli *et al.* in this Focus highlight) and weaker competences in the second.

2) *Policies* pertain to single policy instruments and their institutional design. They are connected to specific regulatory principles (How are access or responsibilities defined, how are rights and/or duties acquired? What role is played by need or the payment of contributions or the payment of taxes and how they are used?) Their foundation and legitimacy – rooted in certain ideas of justice, deservingness and freedom – translate into precise mechanisms that tend to produce specific outputs that have spatial implications. Pollution makes the issue more complex, however, given that air and water pollution might easily cross borders and jurisdictions: a classic example is acid rain. A local impact requires a more global supranational agreement, which is much more complex to achieve.

3) *Contextual conditions* provide the actual configuration of issues (e.g. the emissions of pollutants of agriculture and farming in a specific area or

specific backward heating technologies) and needs with which current policy instruments must cope, within specific regulatory jurisdictions. Context influences the impact and effectiveness of specific arrangements, as a particular measure might produce different effects when implemented in different local contexts (e.g. the youth guarantee). The issues' magnitude filters the resources' adequacy; the institutional capacity might enhance the coordination effectiveness, etc. Context sensitivity should therefore be considered from an analytical point of view in order to understand the relationships between space/scales, policies/measures and politics.

4) *Politics* involves actors and stakeholders, both public and private (i.e. for-profit and not-for-profit), who interact within set jurisdictions following specific policy logics. They use specific policy instruments to (re)produce historically and spatially situated forms of addressing social and environmental issues, along with the resulting patterns of inclusion and exclusion and the peculiar forms of inequality they produce. Obviously, the resulting spatiality is not fixed over time, but might change according to the transformations within the four analytical dimensions briefly sketched out.

In synthesis, these four analytical dimensions define the relational space within which social and environmental issues are embedded, contributing to the definition of the relevant scales through the use of their jurisdictionally designed degrees of freedom. Moreover, through the implementation and practices related to single measures, the mediating role played by politics becomes particularly salient in producing specific opportunity structures and specific (unequal) outcomes or in addressing specific local conflicts. The contributions to this Focus refer – implicitly or explicitly – to these four dimensions in their varying mixes.

### *Inequalities and the ways they are produced*

All essays in this Focus address the relationship between sustainable welfare and socioeconomic inequalities. They contribute to an expanding scholarly discussion in at least three strands of literature. The first concerns how factors like poverty, inequality, and unequal access to resources and opportunity can increase environmental degradation by disproportionately burdening disadvantaged people and diminishing their ability to deal with environmental challenges (Volturo, Ruser). The second, based on environmental justice research, emphasizes how environmental deterioration, such as climate change, pollution, and ecosystem degradation, can worsen social inequities by disproportionately harming underprivileged communities (Carrosio and De Vidovich). Sustainable welfare studies emphasize that resolving social inequities is critical to achieving sustainability, and that social justice considerations must be integrated into sustainability

policies and practices to ensure that the benefits of social and economic growth are shared equitably. Indeed, this relationship is not straightforward, and it represents the focus of the third strand of literature, which is concerned with how the green transition has affected trends and dynamics of social inequality (Carrosio and Di Vidovich; Koch *et al.*; Natali *et al.*; Mandelli *et al.*).

Environmental policy implementation may actually function as a mechanism for producing and reproducing three sorts of inequalities related to: 1) redistribution, 2) representation and 3) recognition (Fraser 2009). These are the result of the specific dynamic and interplay of the four analytical categories proposed above: specific policy instruments, based on specific regulatory principles exerted within given jurisdictions and put forward by specific political coalitions, also sometimes as a result of struggles and conflicts.

1) In terms of the *redistributive* dimension, numerous authors emphasize the risk of a more unequal distribution of wealth and environmental assets as a result of environmental policy implementation. For example, the just transition approach recognizes that particular areas and workers may be disproportionately affected by the green transition and require targeted assistance, such as job training programmes and unemployment insurance (Krawchenko and Gordon 2021). Green gentrification literature, on the other hand, investigates the relationships between urban sustainability policies, rising housing costs, displacement, and exclusionary pressure in cities. Climate adaptation measures (e.g. greening, nature-based solutions) might result in higher housing and living costs, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged social groups (Garcia-Lamarca *et al.* 2021; Cucca *et al.* 2023). Strategies to increase building stock energy efficiency through ecological retrofitting and digital solutions for energy-saving technologies have been connected to growing house prices (Grossmann and Huning 2015; Bouzarovski *et al.* 2018). Critical scholars are also increasingly questioning strategies for efficient and sustainable land use, such as densification (against urban sprawl), for their potential implications for housing inequalities (Cavicchia 2021; Debrunner *et al.* 2022), targeting more affluent groups and appealing to the «eco-conscious» middle-class elites (Rérat *et al.* 2009; Rosol 2015). However, such consequences are dependent on and impacted by the governance arrangements at different levels, housing, and welfare systems, and may exhibit distinct patterns according to the various degrees of urbanization and varying jurisdictions. Housing policy can thus be another crucial pillar of a sustainable welfare system.

2) The component of justice related to *representation* refers to inequities in decision-making procedures (governance instruments and design) that result in uneven authority and various options for influencing the policy agenda. Despite the growing inclusion of civil society in public decision-making around the world, there is substantial evidence that citizen participation – in the absence of proper organizational design and structure – may limit deliberation to exclusive social

groups and, as a result, produce policy outcomes biased towards partial interests (see Warren 2009). In response, some have suggested that the pursuit of social justice through participatory methods must include targeted attention to those who benefit the least from the current resource allocation system (Ahn *et al.* 2023).

3) Finally, the *recognition* dimension relates to a lack of attention to the identities and specificities of people and places, which may be disregarded or not recognized in policy. Recognition justice, according to van Uffelen (2022), is concerned with the right acknowledgment of all players through social arrangements, law, and status order. Taking the energy sector as an example, social recognition occurs through the implementation of energy infrastructure and the provision of cheap rates. Actors can recognize each other's dignity, intrinsic value, and equal moral standing through legislation, such as by granting rights and duties to communities, animals, or nature. Finally, through the status order, actors can recognize the value of certain cultural identities and their (epistemic) contributions to society, such as by taking indigenous communities' needs, perspectives, concerns, and knowledge seriously rather than dismissing them, or by supporting workers affected by regional coal phase-outs. When applied to empirical data, distinguishing between distinct realms of recognition provides higher descriptive and explanatory value. However, it seems likely that various forms of inequality coexist and are self-sustaining in practices where (in the respective jurisdictions) they occur.

To achieve sustainable welfare and reduce social inequities, integrated and transformative approaches – as partly discussed in most contributions to this Focus – are required, including policy initiatives that promote tools to deal with redistributive, procedural, and recognition-related aspects of justice. These approaches should also be taking into proper consideration the jurisdictions within which they are to be applied and the ways in which the regulatory principles underlying specific measures influence concrete patterns.

### 3. Framing the scenarios of transition: Paradigms and the roles of eco-social policies

Given the complexities and challenges discussed above, in order to frame the contributions to this Focus, it could be useful to synthesize possible emerging paradigms and roles that eco-social policy instruments might play.

#### *Sustainable welfare: Which transition paradigm?*

The debate on the different paradigms of development is a crucial structural element in the definition of a possible transition to a sustainable standard of

living. Some researchers question the future of the welfare state in light of what Bailey (2015) defines as an environmental paradox: within the growth paradigm, welfare capitalism requires the production-accumulation-redistribution cycle to advance; however, the downsizing of welfare provisions following the compression of this cycle would have unsustainable effects on both environmental protection and social (in)equalities. This would occur because economic and social imbalances caused by the withdrawal of welfare resources would exacerbate ecosystem degradation – for example, by limiting economic opportunities to access (expensive) clean technologies, hindering environmental education, and influencing consumer behaviours who more likely opt for cheaper, less environmentally friendly products due to financial constraints.

As described by Carrosio and De Vidovich and Koch *et al.* herein, the debate on potential solutions can be drastically simplified by distinguishing between those who support green growth and degrowth scenarios.

According to green growth scholars and supporters, among them the EU and its Member States (Mandelli *et al.* in this Focus), the pursuit of environmental goals, including climate change mitigation, requires an active role of the state, setting goals and targets, managing risks, and promoting green industrial policy and green jobs. This would be done by a progressive dematerialization of growth, including the implementation of circular economies, but still within a growth paradigm, and would provide synergies between economic, ecological and social welfare goals though the decoupling of gross domestic product (GDP) growth from carbon emissions and resource use. However, improvements in energy efficiency in recent decades have been equalized by increases in overall economic activity: comparative research (Parrique *et al.* 2019) has highlighted a strong link between GDP per capita, on the one hand, and carbon emissions, ecological production and consumption footprints, on the other.

Against this background, we can identify a second scenario supporting the shift towards a system producing human wellbeing while abandoning the postulate of growth – the so called «no-», «post-» or «degrowth» approach (Büchs and Koch 2017). There are currently a variety of heterogeneous approaches that share the common goal to re-embed production and consumption patterns into planetary limits through a decrease in material and energy consumption, particularly in rich countries. In a post-growth society, the role of welfare policies would be to ensure that everyone's basic needs are met while simultaneously reducing the consumption of resources and energy (Koch 2018). Therefore, welfare policies – and wellbeing in general – would not necessarily be linked to economic growth, but rather to the equitable distribution of resources, redirecting much of the financial burden towards high-consumption households, and a decrease in total consumption. This

would address the «double injustice» characterizing the situation of the poorest household groups, who are at the same time the least responsible for environmental damage and climate change and the worst placed to cope with mitigation and adaptation (*ibidem*). Over the past few years, many different suggestions have been made concerning the theorization of a set of welfare policies supporting a degrowth perspective, but they have mostly been studied in separate disciplines with too little cross-fertilization, and there is still a need to combine, complement, and unify these policy ideas into a coherent strategy.

### *The role of eco-social policy instruments*

When we try to understand the possible roles of social policies (as well as related social work practices; see Volturo herein) in the transition using the above presented analytical dimensions, we need to consider – as we mentioned above – three additional aspects: 1) to date, implementation of so-called eco-social policies in local and regional jurisdictions is extremely diversified, fragmented and still poorly mapped; 2) the possible presence of different sorts of eco-social measures does not necessarily follow from an explicit eco-social framework, strategy or programming: they might have been designed following regulatory principles that characterize policy and/or welfare systems per se; and 3) the very definition of eco-social policy in the literature is not necessarily established and agreed upon, and any attempt to design a conceptual or organizational typology is necessarily provisional and incomplete and might need to integrate several approaches. However, based on the above presented analytical dimensions, the accompanying assumptions and considerations, the recent research in this field (Mandelli 2022; Benegiamo *et al.* 2023; Matutini *et al.* 2023, the papers included in this Focus) and the growing literature in context-based social policy analysis (Vanderbroucke 2017; Ciccia and Javornik 2018; Kazepov *et al.* 2022), we can identify six possible main roles of policies and social work in the ecological transition:

1. *Counteracting* social risks emerging due to the ecological crisis and transition by providing protective measures and networks (e.g. universalistic/basic income and pensions, or health and care services) and combining social and environmental justice conditions through redistributive compensation, paying attention to include groups with less voice and bargaining power (see, for example, Mandelli *et al.* herein).

2. *Preventing* harmful social effects of the ecological crisis and transition, integrating workerist and economic social investment interventions with a broader focus on people's life course (e.g. greening education and training, equal opportunities, work-life quality and balance; e.g. Gough 2014) and the conditions of inter-generational justice (Carter 2011).



3. *Accompanying* transition processes at multiple levels and jurisdictions, dealing with emerging trade-offs and conflicts, and facilitating the inclusion of weaker actors in defining problems and designing solutions. Examples are systemic action research (Ison 2017), community organizations and renewable energy communities (Carrosio and De Vidovich herein), deliberative citizen forums (Koch *et al.* herein), combining conditions of procedural justice and substantive aspects of ecological transition (Boström 2012) by combating energy poverty while supporting renewable sources.

4. *Supporting/accompanying* experimental, bottom-up and context-based processes and collaborative mobilizations oriented towards the development of new lifestyles, new behavioural and relational patterns, local economies and forms of protection (Stave 2010; Oreszczyn and Lane 2017); possibly having bottom-linked initiatives (Moulaert *et al.* 2013) and an integrated multi-scalar and multi-actor view (Kazepov *et al.* 2019).

5. *Decarbonizing* welfare operations and public spending – e.g. distributional, functional, institutional and regulatory recalibration (Ferrera *et al.* 2000; on pension funds, see Natali *et al.* herein) – towards ecological limits; context-sensitivity; organizational learning, flexibilization, efficiency and reduction of dissipative mechanisms; increasing universalistic and primary prevention and care; and sustainable procurement practices (Meehan and Bryde 2011).

6. *Fostering* transformative socio-economic changes according to different narratives and approaches (e.g. Koch *et al.* herein), towards green growth or post-growth models, while differently articulating concepts such as sustainable development and welfare, circular economy, sustainable business model, etc.

The political strategies adopted and put forward depend on the complex and context-sensitive interplay among different jurisdictions; specific policy designs; regulatory principles; specific socio-economic, demographic, and ecological contextual conditions; and the agency of the actors involved, mediated by specific political logics. Disentangling these dimensions becomes an empirical question, as the contributions of this Focus show – but requires also the identification of specific – more *paradigmatic* – structural elements within which agency unfolds.

#### 4. The contributions to this Focus of *Politiche Sociali*

The objective of this collection of articles is to provide theoretical and empirical contributions, expanding the debate on the links between the eco-social crisis, the social and environmental risks, and the role of transition policies within different paradigms.

In the Focus, we have collected six contributions that offer different but well-integrated perspectives on diverse theoretical perspectives and lenses to approach the debate on sustainable welfare, in particular on how different jurisdictions, policy measures and instruments, contextual specificities, and the role of politics and agency interact to create specific outputs. The time/spatial/multilevel governance dimensions of risks, and the related responses and outcomes in social and environmental terms, are precisely the result of that interaction, showing how experiences of more or less integrated eco-social welfare approaches, eco-social policies, and eco-social practices on the ground might have both positive and negative outputs.

Koch, Büchs, and Lindellee's article analyses how some of the pillars of such a new generation of social policy may be conceptualized by highlighting commonalities between the 2022 IPCC report and the sustainable welfare literature. Methodologically triangulating content analysis of the IPCC report, a literature review and qualitative data analysis from citizen forums, the authors argue that this convergence is particularly evident in four areas central to policymaking: 1) the importance of human needs in eco-social policymaking; 2) the identification of governance structures suitable for a social-ecological transformation; 3) the requirement to co-develop policies via a deliberative, bottom-up element; and 4) the need to decouple welfare provision from economic growth.

The paper by Carrosio and De Vidovich examines the interdependencies between the environmental and the fiscal crisis, constructing a framework for the concept of «eco-welfare» and discussing how mainstream policies might resolve the two crises. Finally, the topic of energy poverty is introduced to illustrate the possibility of mending the rifts between the environment and society through eco-welfare policies that emphasize prevention and redistribution, and that recognize the interdependencies between social and environmental sustainability.

The article by Ruser examines the implications of social welfare policy debates in the context of urgent climate change. It claims that framing social policy reform as an unavoidable adjustment has significant implications for the ability to express disagreement. Similar to discussions about a Third Way informing the welfare state reform debate in the 1990s, the emphasis on functional reforms conceals normative convictions and can therefore influence the demarcation criteria for «deserving» and «undeserving» recipients of social support and the shift to an emphasis on individual (lack of) responsibility hiding the often structural nature of the issues at stake.

Mandelli, Cacciapaglia, and Sabato's research examines the fundamental characteristics of prominent EU policy instruments designed to resolve the social implications of the green transition established within the 2019 European Green Deal. The Just Transition Fund (JTF) and the proposal for a Social Climate

Fund (SCF) have been chosen as the two instruments to compare. The article proposes a novel analytical framework based on both the emerging literature on eco-social policies and the framework for policy design. The empirical findings of the study indicate that the EU addresses the social consequences of the green transition by relying on a concept of just transition that is predominantly reactive and oriented towards a social investment strategy.

The article by Natali, Raitano, and Valenti proposes a review of the anticipated impact of the green transition on Italy's pension policy. The article has three objectives. The first is to examine the most significant effects of the ecological transition on economic growth, labour markets, and financial markets. The second is to clarify the anticipated impacts on the long-term viability of pensions. The third is to propose a consideration of future reform strategies and the underlying dilemmas for policymakers.

Lastly, Volturo's article investigates the role of social work in contributing to the shift towards a sustainable welfare paradigm by exploring, through qualitative research, the perspective of social workers engaged in the struggle against poverty. Despite pervasive sensitivity among the social workers interviewed, the empirical findings indicate that anti-poverty policies are still incapable of implementing interventions that integrate environmental justice and social justice.

All in all, the different contributions provide an articulated view on the complexities at stake that require multiple theoretical and empirical entry points to be related to one another if we want better to understand the roots of the current social and ecological crisis.

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