



EP4U STUDENT CONTEST WINNING PAPER

Beyond Carbon Neutrality: Three Steps for the EU

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Abstract

This policy paper attempts to address some of the key steps the EU could take to move beyond climate-neutrality. It is important that Europe's ambitions do not end with becoming the first climate-neutral continent. As the home of many of the world's early industrialisers, Europe arguably has a moral duty to lead the green revolution as it did the historical industrial revolution.

Introduction

As part of the European Green Deal, the EU aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent¹. This goal includes no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, a decoupling of economic growth and resource use, and leaving no person or place behind². This policy paper will focus on steps beyond climate-neutrality to provide a vision of Europe's future trajectory in climate policy with the aim of ensuring Europe's ambition keeps evolving. Three steps will be proposed which have clear impacts on the EU's role as a global leader including how it can pioneer climate policy beyond being the first climate-neutral continent; this will also relate to Europe's economy, labour, and the wellbeing of its citizens.

¹ European Commission (2021a) *A European Green Deal*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities->

[2019-2024/european-green-deal_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en) (Accessed: 14/12/2021)

² Ibid.

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Step 1

The natural first step once climate-neutrality is achieved is to aid other states, regions, and continents in following. This includes sharing any innovations or technology Europe develops, especially methods that enable carbon neutral transition minimising impacts or disruptions to economic processes as some states object to climate policies requiring any economic sacrifice, even if only in the short term. This would help poorer countries and regions that may not have resource reserves to prioritise climate solutions and hence, without help, may exploit natural resources like coal and gas to promote growth.

Providing guidance on climate-neutral transitioning is a significant way the EU and Europe can expand their global influence and leadership while responding to the collective environmental crisis. As climate damage is a collective problem, it is in Europe's interest to use its position as a global leader to enable and, if necessary, peacefully pressure others into climate-neutrality. Existing partnerships with other international and regional cooperative organisations can be used; for example, providing an example for other economic and political unions like the African Union or ASEAN. As rising powers change the West's long-term power dominance in the international system, sustainable innovation and models may be a key method of retaining influence.

Among rising or emerging powers, the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) are of great significance as they tend to resist the West's

traditional Bretton Woods system due to the unbalanced power balance within these institutions³. They often seek to explicitly counterbalance the West and attempt to advocate for the Global South⁴. Rising powers, like the BRICs, seem keen to become global leaders, meaning they must address collective problems despite some reluctance towards environmental action. The EU could therefore take the role of a facilitator and ally, aiding their rise rather than taking a competitive, zero-sum approach to global power balance changes. The rise of some countries does not have to be to the disadvantage of others, if handled in the right manner; arguably, a multi-polar power balance will emerge through cooperation or conflict so this change should be embraced to minimise conflict.

Soft power, including leading by example through demonstrating climate-neutral pathways, is arguably the EU's greatest asset in retaining and increasing influence. Aiding the BRICs towards climate-neutrality could be especially beneficial due to their large populations and mixed climate policies, such as high investment in renewables research but heavy reliance on coal⁵, although this may be challenging to achieve.

Step 2

Another positive step Europe should consider after becoming the first climate-neutral continent is to become the first climate-positive continent. This includes expanding on the successful methods of achieving carbon neutrality, including the use of knowledge and

³ Petrone, F. (2019) 'BRICS, soft power and climate change: new challenges in global governance?', *Ethics & Global Politics*, Vol. 12 (Issue 2), pp. 19-30. DOI: 10.1080/16544951.2019.1611339

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Petrone:2019

innovation networks, and pioneering large-scale carbon negativity.

The EU contains many of the world's best academic institutions and academics, forming a network of knowledge hubs in addition to cross-cultural projects and exchanges created by the Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes. Furthermore, the EU contains many industry-leading science and technology companies, two industries that are key to developing climate-positive solutions. This vast network could be used to pioneer beyond climate-neutrality, ensuring that the EU remains a global climate leader and does not slow its ambitions after becoming the first climate-neutral continent.

In July 2021, the EU formally adopted the European Climate Law which included the target of becoming climate-neutral and achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050⁶. Further climate laws and 'softer' means, such as financial support, could be introduced to also encourage the private sector beyond climate-neutrality and towards climate-positivity. Legal measures are arguably essential to ensure climate protection and prevent individual member states' environmental policies from sliding backwards due to domestic administration and agenda changes.

⁶ European Commission (2021b) *Climate Action: European Climate Law*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/clima/eu-action/european-green-deal/european-climate-law_en (Accessed: 17/12/2021)

⁷ Smith, B. (2020) *Microsoft will be carbon negative by 2030*. Available at: <https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2020/01/16/microsoft-will-be-carbon-negative-by-2030/> (Accessed: 17/12/2021)

⁸ Budinis, S. (2020) *Going carbon negative: What are the technology options?* Available at:

To further pioneer, the EU could pledge to make Europe the first continent to remove all historic emissions. Similarly, Microsoft committed to remove all of its historical emissions by 2050⁷. This would be challenging for a continent on many fronts. Firstly, it would be complex to quantify Europe's historical emissions; Europe's academic and technical knowledge networks could help achieve this. As Europe is home to many of the early industrialisers, and therefore large polluters, there is arguably a moral duty to address Europe's historical negative environmental impact. Having led in causing damage through historical industrial revolutions, it would be positive to lead the green industrial revolution.

A second challenge to addressing historical emissions is methods of carbon removal. These can be nature-based solutions like reforestation and farming land management, or technological solutions like capturing carbon dioxide⁸. However, some of these methods, like direct air capture, are currently very expensive and extract a fraction of what they need to⁹. Despite these challenges, becoming the first climate-positive, carbon-negative continent would be valuable for Europe's image and beneficial for counteracting climate damage. More extensive climate ambitions may also help to counterbalance any non-EU countries that fail,

<https://www.iea.org/commentaries/going-carbon-negative-what-are-the-technology-options> (Accessed: 17/12/2021)

⁹ Palmer, I. (2021) *Scale Up Of CO2 Capture And Storage Looks Massive, Expensive And Impractical To Manage*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ianpalmer/2021/11/29/scale-up-of-carbon-capture-and-storage-looks-massive-expensive-and-impractical-to-manage/?sh=6443b3716b10> (Accessed: 17/12/2021)

due to protectionism or lack of resources, to meet the climate targets necessary to avoid crossing climate tipping points.

Overall, once climate-neutrality is achieved, the EU should aim to make Europe the first climate-positive continent, including the goal of removing historical emissions. Europe's exceptional knowledge and innovation networks can aid in the technology needed to drive this change.

Step 3

A third step beyond climate-neutrality involves broader societal transformation. Ideas about restructuring the economy and labour relations should be explored with the aim of removing social and environmental exploitation from the work and production process. The social aspect of this would benefit the climate as people would have more time to make sustainable changes in their lives. Overall, this would be a shift from government-driven change – which is necessary to ensure climate targets are met in time – towards local, community-driven change which would engrain sustainability in society. Presumably, local and individual-level change will naturally happen as part of transitioning to becoming a climate-neutral continent. However, additional initiatives and structures may be needed to fully engrain sustainable lifestyle and cultural changes across all demographics. This relates to the European Green Deal's goal of leaving no person or place behind.

To achieve this societal transformation of economy, labour relations, lifestyle, and communities, ideas need to be generated. Potentially, the EU could initiate this idea generation through forums that connect academics, think tanks, and citizens; furthermore, they could fund or encourage

member states to fund short-term experiments implementing ideas generated.

Although this step is more abstract, it covers a much longer timeline and aims to embed sustainable change deeper than temporary, finite climate goals.

Conclusion

Overall, this policy paper attempts to address some of the key steps the EU could take to move beyond climate-neutrality. It is important that Europe's ambitions do not end with becoming the first climate-neutral continent. As the home of many of the world's early industrialisers, Europe arguably has a moral duty to lead the green revolution as it did the historical industrial revolution. Furthermore, the EU can extend its influence and solidify its position as a global leader by aiding other continents and countries towards climate-neutrality. This includes rising powers like the BRICs that are changing global power balances, a shift that would be beneficial for the EU to make cooperative. The EU can continue its climate leadership by becoming the first climate-positive continent and setting the ambitious aim of removing its historic emissions. This challenge may require the use of Europe's extensive academic and technological knowledge hubs and networks. Finally, for these sustainable changes to be engrained into European society in the long-term, Europe must experiment with ideas that reshape the way its people live and work, separating structures from social and environmental exploitation. Through these steps, the EU can benefit the climate and its citizens while furthering Europe's influence in the international arena.

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