

## Why We Need a New Eco-Social Contract

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### *Abstract*

*Calls for new economic and social approaches to combine social and climate justice have become louder and more urgent in light of the current COVID-19 and climate crises. The need to address inequalities, exploitation of people, and lacking respect for the natural boundaries of our planet have led to new approaches such as just transition, wellbeing economics or a new eco-social contract. This article will show why a new eco-social contract needs to combine social and climate justice and what we can learn from an analysis and the comparison of the different visions regarding such a contract.*

*Keywords: eco-social contract, inequality, sustainable development goals, climate justice, social justice*

### **Introduction: Multiple crises and the call for social and climate justice**

In recent years, new economic and social approaches to combine social and climate justice have been discussed, ranging from a global political agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by UN member states in 2015, to concepts such as *doughnut economics* (Raworth 2017) or *wellbeing economics* (Wellbeing Economics Alliance 2021), to the *just transition* approach, which highlights the social justice dimension of transitions towards a low-carbon economy (Morena et al. 2019).

In addition, there are different voices from both business and civil society groups (presented in section 3) addressing multiple crises and long-term challenges which have undermined citizens' trust in governments and polarized societies and demanding a new 21<sup>st</sup> century social contract that stipulates a shared vision and rights and obligations as well as accountability mechanisms. In line with the principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this

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new social contract needs to be fully inclusive, leaving no one behind, while also promoting climate justice and halting environmental destruction: what the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) calls an “eco-social contract” (UNRISD 2021a).

This article analyses how multiple crises and an unsustainable global economic model have undermined the progress towards the sustainable development goals (SDGs), hollowed out existing social contracts and led to powerful movements for social and environmental justice. We will further discuss the concept of a new eco-social contract as a potential pathway to create the necessary alliances between social and climate justice demands and actors.

The contribution is divided into five sections: the second section analyses how recent crises, and in particular the COVID-19 pandemic, have impacted on the social and climate justice debate. Beyond the SDGs, protest movements such as the *yellow vests* in France and the COVID-19 crisis have shown that there is a need to address social and climate justice simultaneously and bring ecological and social movements together. The third section discusses different visions of how to combine climate and social justice. Section four sketches out some basic principles to guide deliberations and negotiations regarding a new eco-social contract.<sup>2</sup> Section five discusses possible ways forward.

### **How recent crises have impacted the social and climate justice debate**

We argue that there are several reasons why multiple crises and the SDG implementation demand a new eco-social contract. For one, rising inequalities already apparent before COVID, persistent poverty, social exclusion, governance failures and the climate crisis are signaling that existing social contracts – for example those brokered in the post-war period, promising more equalized capital-labour relations and future prosperity, or others crafted in post-colonial states in Africa, promising inclusive development – are broken (UNRISD 2021a). Furthermore, recent crises, in particular COVID-19, but also the climate crisis, have reversed previous progress on poverty, equality and SDG implementation. With regard to poverty, according to the World Bank (2020), absolute poverty rates are on the rise for the first time since the 1990s, and the impact of COVID-19 is expected to set back progress towards ending extreme poverty by at least three years. South Asia will be the region hit hardest, with at least 49 million additional people in extreme poverty, followed by sub-Saharan Africa with between 26 million and 40 million (World Bank 2020). The number of persons suffering from hunger and food insecurity is also on the rise, a process that started before the outbreak of the pandemic and is now accelerating. Almost 690 million people were undernourished in 2019, up by nearly 60 million since 2014. About 2 billion people were affected by moderate or severe food insecurity in 2019, and the estimated figure for chronic hunger in 2020 rose by more than 130 million as a result of COVID-19 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2020).

Turning to inequality, both economic and group-based inequalities continue to increase within and among countries as a result of adverse impacts related to the climate crisis, the Great Recession, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and vulnerable groups are hit especially hard (Berkhout, Galasso, Lawson, Rivero, Teneja and Vazquez 2021; Hujo/Carter 2019). Young workers

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<sup>2</sup> This article draws in part on a chapter by Kempf and Hujo (2022).

are twice as likely to live in extreme poverty as adult workers. Rural areas are home to 85% of people without access to electricity (UN DESA 2020). The COVID crisis brought different forms of inequality to the surface, including income and gender inequality as well as discrimination based on race. Women, especially women of colour, are more likely to lose their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, job loss and increasing unpaid care burdens have also prompted many of them to stall or even abandon their careers and lose financial security. In the United Kingdom, 22% of people from ethnically diverse communities lost their jobs, well above the average of 9% (McKinsey Global Institute 2020a). Employment impacts of the current pandemic are also more pronounced than they were during the financial crisis of 2008-09. According to the ILO (2021), 114 million jobs were lost and working hour losses in 2020 were approximately four times higher than in 2008-09.

Finally, unsustainable policies and practices and impacts of multiple crises are probably the greatest challenge for achieving the SDGs during the current Decade of Action. The failure of our global socioeconomic model to produce sustainable development has resulted in an urgent climate crisis, which the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement aim to tackle. Economic incentives at all levels – global, national, business and individual – are more focused on extracting maximum value from economic processes rather than on investing in strengthening systems that are resilient and sustainable in economic and social terms. According to the Emission Gap Report (UNEP 2020), the world is still headed towards a steep temperature rise of over 3°C this century – far beyond the Paris Agreement goals of limiting global warming to well below 2°C and pursuing 1.5°C. The pace of climate change also seems to be accelerating. The year 2019 was the second warmest on record and the end of the warmest decade on record, bringing with it destructive wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, and other climate-related disasters, increasing poverty and hunger (UN DESA 2020).

Consumption and production patterns that are not sustainable result in the depletion of natural resources, pollution and environmental deterioration (UN DESA 2020). Deforestation and biodiversity threats caused by unsustainable supply chains increase the likelihood of future epidemics (SDR 2020). According to the Dasgupta Review (Dasgupta 2021: 114, 123), we have failed to manage our global portfolio of assets sustainably. Estimates show that between 1992 and 2014, produced capital per person doubled and human capital per person increased by about 13% globally; but the stock of natural capital per person declined by nearly 40%. While humanity has prospered, it has come at a devastating cost to nature. The report stipulates that estimates of our total impact on nature suggest that we would require 1.6 Earths to maintain the world's current living standards.

### **Imagining the future differently: calls for a new social contract**

Civil society is increasingly pressuring for a green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, which could help put the world on track towards 2°C and to approach the ambitious goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. However, observer organizations like the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC) declared that the outcomes of the recent Conference of the Parties (COP 26), taking place in Glasgow in November 2021, did not meet the demands of civil society and

the scientific community. Instead, the WGC qualified the commitments as weak and non-progressive for human rights and climate justice (WGC 2021).

Beyond spotlight events such as the COP 26, more and more actors are demanding a new social contract between people, between citizens and governments, and between people and nature. The UNRISD introduced the concept of a new eco-social contract and is currently catalysing debates and activities related to it (UNRISD 2021a; Hujo/Kempf 2021).

Calls for a new eco-social contract are coming from different actors such as the UN, trade unions, business actors and social movements, suggesting that only a combination of social and climate action as well as stronger multilateral action including both civil society and the private sector will allow us to move forward effectively. In the following, we will briefly outline the demands by these different actors.

On Mandela Day, the 18th of July 2020, the UN Secretary-General stated that “the response to the pandemic, and to the widespread discontent that preceded it, must be based on a New Social Contract and a New Global Deal that create equal opportunities for all and respect the rights and freedoms of all” (United Nations News 2020b). This call for a new social contract was taken up in the Secretary-General’s Common Agenda report (UN 2021).

Trade unions such as the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC) and others (see e.g. Trade Union Forum of the Americas 2020) are also calling for a new social contract, one that provides decent work, access to public services and tax justice. The ITUC identifies five action points for building a new social contract: (1) creation of climate-friendly jobs with a just transition to achieve net-zero carbon emissions; (2) rights for all workers, regardless of their employment arrangements; (3) universal social protection, with the establishment of a Social Protection Fund for the least wealthy countries; (4) equality and ending all discrimination such as by race or gender; and (5) inclusion, to combat the growing power of monopolies and oligarchs, to ensure that developing countries can actually develop their economies, and to build tax systems that provide the income governments need to meet the needs of people and the planet (ITUC 2021). The European Trade Union Institute and Confederation (ETUI and ETUC 2021) argue that climate and social goals need to be addressed together in line with Kate Raworth’s (2017) *safe and just space for humanity* and call for the development of a social-ecological or ‘eco-social’ framework.

Representatives from the business sector have made suggestions regarding the role of private companies in a new social contract. The McKinsey Global Institute proposes a systemic role for the private sector in targeting vulnerable groups through the provision of affordable goods and services such as housing and childcare, describing that as “more cost-effective for the social contract than aiming to stabilise incomes” (2020b: 12). This would also include providing digital identification, payment channels and collection of data for better targeting benefits to the neediest. Businesses have expressed a number of demands regarding their role in a 21<sup>st</sup> century social contract, summarised by The Business Role (BSR) (2020) as: stakeholder capitalism; skills development and career pathways; economic security and mobility; a just transition to net zero emissions; and worker data protection.

Social movements such as Fridays For Future (2021), Black Lives Matter (2021) and Extinction Rebellion (2021) demand urgent climate and environmental action, intergenerational jus-

tice and gender and racial equality as well as direct participation in decision making, for example through citizen assemblies. They are calling for a new eco-social contract that is inclusive and participatory and brings in all actors under legally binding commitments in favor of social justice and the environment. The Treaty Alliance (2021), a network of advocacy groups, wants to hold business accountable through laws on supply chains and calls for a binding treaty on business and human rights which would make social and environmental standards legally enforceable.

When comparing the demands of trade unions to those of business (ITUC 2021; McKinsey Global Institute 2020b; BSR 2020), the concepts of non-discrimination and the need to address climate change are common concerns, but business puts emphasis on targeted social policies and safety nets while trade unions argue in favor of universal social protection for all and in all countries. Both workers' and business representatives are asking for just transitions to achieve net-zero emissions without compromising social justice. While business actors propose achieving this by means of the creation of high-quality jobs in the green sector and new skills development, trade unions demand concrete policies for job creation, education and health in this transition. The UN and social movements are both demanding urgent climate action as well as the promotion of equality and social justice and an end to racial and other group-based discrimination. While the UN sees this happening through networked multilateralism, many movements question the capacity of nation states and governments and want more direct civic participation in decision making. Finally, they also demand enabling (policy) environments for alternative economic models.

What emerges from the different stakeholders' views on a new eco-social contract is a broad consensus on the urgency to act. At the same time, there are significant differences of perspective regarding the substance and the scope of necessary reforms as well as the distribution of costs and benefits associated with change processes. There is also the debate on what needs to come first, behavioral change by citizens and corporations or stronger regulations and actions by politicians. In this context, Willis (2020) observes a waiting game and mutual blaming between citizens and governments. In addition, a reliance on voluntary standards and 'nudging' could result in insufficient action by business actors, as articulated in the various critiques on voluntary standards and self-regulation such as the UN Global Compact or Corporate Social Responsibility approaches (Utting 2010; 2002).

### **New visions for an eco-social contract: From *buen vivir* to wellbeing economics**

The world is once more at a critical juncture and decisions taken today will shape our future. Against the backdrop of failing or broken social contracts, embarking on a process of designing new contracts for social and ecological justice should become a priority in all countries and communities. As the previous section has shown, different stakeholder groups have submitted their proposals, but many voices are yet missing and a new consensus needs to be reached. A new eco-social contract would provide a new vision and a roadmap for society and redefine rights and obligations for citizens, business actors and the state. Getting there requires democratic participatory processes and dialogue, so that both process and outcomes are legitimate and representative of the broader public interest. Indeed, existing real-world social contracts

have often been exclusionary, representing dominant powers in society rather than the common good (Kempf/Hujo 2022; Hickey 2011).

Renegotiating social contracts that have lost their legitimacy and usefulness to address urgent challenges can be done through different processes. While social contracts are usually understood as “implicit bargains” (UNRISD 2021a), they are building on and are constituted of important explicit, written contracts and legal frameworks such as constitutions, which are often seen as the basic social contract shaping state-society relations, policies and institutions. Legislating new constitutions is therefore an opportunity to renegotiate social contracts.

The current collective effort under the leadership of a Mapuche woman, Elsa Loncón, to develop a new constitution in Chile, is an example that demonstrates the efforts to rewrite a social contract that was imposed during a military dictatorship and continued after it, not reflecting the changing values and demands democracy brought with it. The fact that the newly voted constitutional commission is led by a representative of the Chilean indigenous community, and by a woman, reflects both the changing mindset and social norms in large parts of the population as well as the continuing struggles that indigenous and other marginalized groups face in the country. Although the process was systematically opposed by corporate media groups and aggressive digital campaigns against the commission (Santander 2021), the democratic election of convention members and the participatory process of drafting the new constitution could usher in transformative outcomes. Importantly, the recent election of social-democrat Gabriel Boric as president, who committed to support the constitutional commission in his election campaign, is a key condition for the process to continue (Urrejola 2021).

Another example showcasing the particular ways social contracts are fundamentally reshaped at critical junctures, often in periods of political regime change or constitutional reform, is the application of traditional knowledge and worldviews that leave behind conventional approaches to wellbeing and re-conceptualize relationships between humans and nature, such as the *buen vivir* concept in Latin America (Gudynas/Acosta 2011). With its origins in traditional notions from the Andean-Amazonian systems of knowledge, *buen vivir* or “living a plentiful life”<sup>3</sup>, is an alternative normative approach to development that was firmly enshrined in the new constitutions of Ecuador in 2008 and Bolivia in 2009 (Vanhulst/Beling 2019).

It is a new vision for sustainability governance which contrasts with the Eurocentric approach adopted during the colonization period and based on extraction of natural resources and exploitation of labour (Vanhulst/Beling 2019), a model that reinforced development patterns that imposed Western ideas on culture, policies and practices, causing ecological breakdowns (Gudynas/Acosta 2011). While in Bolivia, *buen vivir* (*suma qamaña*) comprises ethical and moral principles from different indigenous communities, reflecting the plurinational nature of the state, the Ecuadorian concept of *buen vivir* (*sumac kawsay*) acknowledges nature – or the *Pacha Mama* – as a rights holder, with every person obliged to respect, maintain and restore its integrity while benefiting from the resources it provides (Government of Ecuador 2008).

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<sup>3</sup>*Buen vivir* is the Spanish translation of similar concepts in Quechua (*Sumak Kawsay*), Aymara (*Suma Qamaña*) and other languages. Vanhulst and Beling (2019) observe that the Spanish translation is still controversial as the original names have a wider meaning, indicating that although its roots are found in indigenous traditions, it is still a concept under construction in the context of contemporary discourses and practices.

Although constitutionalising the rights of nature advanced the discussion on the links between power, wellbeing, and resource use, its implementation warrants further scrutiny. Ecuador continues to depend on extractive industries, with adverse environmental impacts. Indigenous communities mobilizing against mining or oil companies are frequently criminalized or repressed (Espinosa 2015, Martínez 2018). Similar contradictions exist in Bolivia, a country that is highly dependent on hydrocarbons and minerals (Paz Arauco 2020).

Another alternative approach with an important impact on social contracts is currently evolving in the global North. A number of countries and communities are moving away from traditional growth-centered notions of progress and towards *wellbeing economics*. New Zealand exemplifies how the approach of wellbeing economics is transforming its social contract: as one of the members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo), a network that comprises Scotland, Wales, Finland, and Iceland, New Zealand pursues new priorities for policy making and implementation and financial allocation by expanding the definition of individual and collective wellbeing. Since 2011, New Zealand's Treasury has been building up the Living Standards Framework (LSF), a guiding tool that expands the understanding of the drivers of wellbeing for present and future generations, thus reorientating policy making and budget design (Government of New Zealand 2021a). The development of the LSF during the last decade also includes *He Ara Waoira* ("a pathway towards wellbeing"), the Maori perspective on wellbeing, and the *Lalanga Fou*, the Pacific perspective, into the approach (Government of New Zealand 2021b). Overall, the LSF considers the following types of capital: human, natural, social, financial, and physical. This approach is the basis for the Wellbeing Budget that indicates the priorities of the government (Government of New Zealand 2021c). Some of these priorities include previously neglected dimensions of wellbeing like mental health, which call for new ways of measuring progress (Kempf/Krause 2020).

Since Finland, another member of the WEGo, presided over the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (ESPCO) in 2019 and promoted a debate about the economics of wellbeing, European states under the Council of the European Union (EU) are also being encouraged to ensure that their policies focus on the multiple dimensions of wellbeing and growth (Feigl 2017). The ESPCO formulated a set of conclusions and recommendations that acknowledged wellbeing economics as a governance approach that enables people to reach and enjoy fundamental rights while also ensuring sustainable, resilient, and inclusive economic growth (CEU 2019). This set of ideas is being forwarded to the EU states and its councils in order to identify and prioritize key drivers of wellbeing and incorporate them in policy decisions (Wellbeing Economics Alliance 2021). Although the approach is still under development, predominantly across richer industrialised countries, the discussion is evolving through networks such as the Wellbeing Economy Alliance and the Global Research and Action Network for an Eco-Social Contract (UNRISD 2021b). Interestingly, some countries expanded the notion of wellbeing to non-human beings. In December 2021, the Spanish Parliament passed a law that changed the denomination of animals from objects to sentient beings. This law applies to both domesticated and wild animals and permeates across civil legislation related to citizens' properties and obligations (Hermida and Sánchez 2021). A similar process took place in 2021 in the UK, where the current Animal Welfare Sentience Bill was changed to include invertebrate

species as sentient beings (Harvey 2021). Both cases were based on the growing scientific evidence for sentience as a trait relevant for animal welfare legislations and future policy making regarding commercial purposes (Birch, Burn, Schnell, Browning and Crump 2021) and as an outcome of strong advocacy by pro animal rights groups.

These recent examples from New Zealand, the EU, Spain, and the UK show that the concept of wellbeing is evolving and gaining traction in national and regional debates about which values should guide policies and how to do justice to different communitarian ideas regarding human relations and relations with nature. Whether incorporated into constitutions, as in the case of Bolivia and Ecuador, or seen as useful guidelines for national or regional policy frameworks, alternative development visions can help to rethink and re-envisage social contracts from the bottom up, questioning mainstream economic models that have led us into deep crises.

Finally, the *just transition* approach, originating from trade union movements of the global North, aims to reconcile a speedy transition towards low-carbon economies with a strong commitment to social justice, thereby trying to avoid the triple injustice that those groups (and countries) that are least responsible for the climate crisis face: They are (1) effectively shouldering most of the costs, including costs associated with green policies that neglect the social impact of mitigation and adaptation policies, for example when energy prices increase; (2) workers in carbon-intensive sectors lose their jobs; and (3) the access to natural resources is restricted for populations who depend on them for their livelihoods (Cook, Smith and Utting 2012; UN-RISD 2016; Morena et al. 2019).

### **The way forward: ways to combine social and climate justice in a new eco-social contract to achieve sustainable and fair societies**

A new eco-social contract will need to be based on solidarity and protect the common good, replacing the attitude of 'us against them' with a stance of 'all of us united' – whether against COVID-19, climate change, or social and racial discrimination. Some movements, and authors such as Willis [2020], suggest that a new eco-social contract should be informed by citizens through citizen assemblies, thereby bringing new perspectives and expertise to combat climate change and serving as a counterbalance to vested interests. Grassroots participation and the inclusion of previously excluded voices are especially necessary when it comes to the process of how to get to a new eco-social contract. With some notable exceptions, some of which were presented in section four, Southern voices and indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge have been neglected in this debate (Chianese 2016). However, much can be learned from them, in particular regarding adaptation to climate change, protection of biodiversity or the sustainable management of natural resources, as the experience with *buen vivir* and alternative wellbeing concepts demonstrate, guaranteeing the legal right to a healthy environment or the rights of nature while rejecting the extractive logic predominant in modern business operations. Instead, these approaches are grounded in principles of self-sufficiency, sustainability and participation, aiming to safeguard biodiversity, minimise pollution of soil, water and air, and preserve natural resources for future generations.

Bringing the green and the social agendas together through integrated rights-based policies would represent real progress towards a new eco-social contract. The SDG framework forges interlinkages between the three pillars of sustainability. This has helped to overcome the idea of developing first and cleaning up later. We must design and implement policies in an integrated and coherent manner. Poverty eradication, for example, needs to be pursued hand in hand with environmental protection, with 70% of the GDP of the poor depending on the environment and natural resources (UNDP-UNEP 2015). Social policies need to be designed in tandem with economic and resource mobilisation policies to promote sustainable and transformative outcomes (Hujo 2020; UNRISD 2016). In the COVID-19 crisis, economic, health and crisis management need to be integrated for measures to be successful.

Further, demographic shifts due to climate change, like induced migration, the need to care for older persons in ageing societies, and changes in labour markets driven by new technologies (Behrendt, Nguyen and Rani 2019), to mention some of the key global trends that shape our present and future, make a review of existing social contracts urgent. New eco-social contracts could also address conflicts over natural resources and their sustainable management as well as benefit sharing. They will need to grapple with governance of the global commons (climate, health, peace, etc.) and the increasing competition over strategic minerals in the global South. There are different kinds of social contracts (Kempf/Hujo 2022) and ideas differ on how to establish a contract with nature, what a new eco-social contract should look like and how it should be implemented. Coming to terms with the multitude of perspectives and context-specificities will require decentralised participatory dialogues and decision making ultimately in favour of climate action, social justice and the common good.

For a new eco-social contract to be sustainable, there has to be a broad societal and global consensus regarding both the questions of what the common public goods are (for example, keeping global warming under 2°C) and how to finance them. Arriving at such a consensus might not be a smooth process – contestation and bargaining, protests and collective action, broad alliances between more and less powerful groups – are necessary to challenge and overcome the status quo. UNRISD’s (2021a) suggestion for a new eco-social contract is one that should be grounded in accountable state-society relations and contribute to sustainable development for people and the planet by reinvigorating various principles, to start with the inclusion of groups that have often been excluded or were included on less favourable terms, for example women, informal workers, ethnic, racial and religious minorities, migrants, and LGBTQIA+ persons. It should also include a fiscal contract that raises sufficient resources in an equitable way, a new economic model that is equitable and sustainable, and a new relationship with nature that protects biodiversity and climate stability. Finally, creating new eco-social contracts requires redressing historical injustices through decolonising knowledge and fostering social, climate and gender justice, and promoting new solidarities at local, national and global levels.

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