

Eco-social welfare and green transformation: Policy integration for just transition and social sustainability

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Abstract. Global green transformation constitutes an ecological and technological transition, as well as a profound process of social restructuring that directly reshapes welfare systems, labor markets, and distributive justice. Despite this multidimensional character, dominant policy debates continue to privilege environmental performance and economic efficiency, thereby marginalizing the social foundations of sustainability. This qualitative exploratory study examines how eco-social welfare principles are articulated and operationalized within green transformation policies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using inductive document-based thematic analysis, the study analyses sustainability through an SDG-centered social justice lens, with particular emphasis on SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). The findings identify three interrelated eco-social domains shaping just transition dynamics: welfare adaptation to ecological risks and climate-induced vulnerability; inclusive governance and participatory justice; and capacity building and communication as foundations of community-based resilience. The results demonstrate that green transformation lacks democratic legitimacy and long-term social viability when social justice remains confined to normative commitments rather than being institutionally embedded in sustainability governance. By comparatively linking welfare adaptation, governance arrangements, and socio-communicative capacity across global policy discourses, the study contributes an analytically integrated perspective to the literature on just transition and eco-social policy, and advances the argument that SDG coherence cannot be achieved through technocratic green growth alone, but requires the systematic integration of social protection, participatory governance, and institutional trust into the core of environmental policy design.

Keywords. Just transition, eco-social policy, environmental governance, social policy, energy transition, social sustainability, climate justice.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and context

Global green transformation has emerged as a multidimensional process that extends far beyond the ecological and technological fields traditionally emphasized in sustainability transitions. While its core objectives, such as decarbonization, renewable energy deployment, and technological innovation, are essential for addressing the climate crisis, these shifts also generate profound implications for social structures, labor markets, and welfare systems [1]. The transformation toward a low-carbon economy,

therefore, represents not only an environmental necessity but also a complex process of social restructuring that redefines the foundations of equity, inclusion, and social protection [2], [3].

Despite this multidimensional nature, contemporary policy debates on green transformation remain dominated mainly by economic growth narratives and environmental performance indicators [4]. Policy frameworks often prioritize technological efficiency, emission-reduction targets, and market-driven incentives while treating social concerns as secondary or complementary considerations. This imbalance risks reproducing existing inequalities and generating new forms of vulnerability, particularly among workers and communities dependent on carbon-intensive sectors [5], [6]. The focus on economic and ecological metrics has thus limited the capacity of green transformation policies to deliver socially inclusive outcomes.

1.2. Problem Statement and Literature Gap

The social dimension of sustainability, encompassing welfare adaptation, distributive justice, and participatory inclusion, remains the least developed pillar within contemporary green policy discourse. As societies navigate the challenges of energy transitions, automation, and escalating ecological risks, welfare institutions face increasing pressure to address emerging vulnerabilities, such as green unemployment, energy poverty, and deepening regional disparities [7]. Addressing these challenges requires systematically integrating social justice principles into environmental governance frameworks to ensure that the costs and benefits of transition are equitably shared. Recognizing the interdependence between social welfare and ecological sustainability is therefore critical for achieving a genuinely just and inclusive green transformation [8], [9].

Although the literature on green transition, just transition, and social justice has expanded rapidly, a persistent structural gap remains between ecological transition policies and social welfare systems. Current sustainability strategies continue to emphasize carbon reduction, energy efficiency, and technological innovation while overlooking how these transformations directly affect livelihoods, welfare provision, and distributive justice. This disjunction limits the inclusiveness and social legitimacy of green policies. It reveals a fundamental research problem: the lack of an integrated eco-social policy architecture that systematically aligns sustainability objectives with welfare mechanisms.

1.3. Aim and Original Contribution of the Study

The present study seeks to address this structural gap by examining how eco-social welfare principles can be systematically embedded within green transformation policies. Eco-social welfare approaches emphasize the intrinsic interconnectedness of environmental sustainability, social protection, and social justice, arguing that welfare systems must evolve to accommodate the ecological constraints and risks inherent in the transition toward low-carbon societies. By reinterpreting sustainability through this lens, the study advances three core original contributions. First, it conceptualizes social welfare not as a compensatory mechanism activated after environmental change, but as a constitutive pillar of green transformation itself. Second, it reframes social justice from a normative aspiration into an operational analytical principle for evaluating sustainability governance. Third, it demonstrates how welfare adaptation, participatory governance, and communicative capacity-building function as interrelated socio-institutional dynamics within just transition processes, based on a comparative reading of global policy frameworks and current scholarship.

1.4. Scope of the Study

The scope of this research is defined through its direct alignment with key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). This targeted SDG framework allows the study to systematically examine the intersections between green transformation, social protection, distributive justice, and participatory governance across multiple policy domains. By situating eco-social welfare within this integrated SDG architecture, the research emphasizes that sustainability

transitions cannot be effectively governed through sectorally fragmented approaches. Instead, it highlights the necessity of strong policy coherence and cross-sectoral coordination across economic, environmental, and social dimensions as a structural precondition for socially inclusive and just green transformation.

1.5. Research Questions (RQs)

The following research questions guide the study, each addressing a key dimension of the eco-social challenges embedded in contemporary green transformation processes.

RQ.1. How can welfare policies adapt to ecological risks and green transition challenges?

This question focuses on the capacity of existing welfare architectures to respond to emerging ecological vulnerabilities, such as energy poverty, climate-induced displacement, and green labor-market restructuring. It interrogates whether current social protection systems remain reactive to traditional risks or can evolve toward anticipatory and resilience-oriented policy instruments.

RQ.2. What institutional and governance mechanisms enable social justice within sustainability frameworks?

This question examines the extent to which sustainability governance arrangements can move beyond formal commitments to participation and equity toward their meaningful institutionalization. It is informed by ongoing debates on procedural and distributive justice in just transition processes and seeks to identify the conditions under which social justice becomes operational rather than merely normative.

RQ.3. How can communication and participation strengthen eco-social resilience and inclusivity?

This question foregrounds the socio-communicative dimension of sustainability transitions and explores how public communication, institutional trust, and participatory learning processes shape societal adaptation to ecological change. It reflects the growing recognition that eco-social resilience depends not only on policy design but also on collective meaning-making and community-based engagement.

1.6. Research Outcomes and Expected Practical Implications

The relevance of this inquiry lies in its interdisciplinary orientation, bridging insights from social work, communication studies, and policy analysis. For policymakers, the study offers an integrated governance lens to align welfare institutions with green transition strategies. For welfare and social policy actors, it provides a framework for proactive ecological risk adaptation and the institutional operationalization of social justice. For civil society organizations and local communities, the study highlights participatory mechanisms and communicative capacity-building as key instruments of eco-social resilience. By situating eco-social welfare within the broader landscape of global sustainability transitions, the research contributes to emerging debates on how inclusive governance, participatory communication, and welfare adaptation can foster social justice in the era of ecological transformation.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of eco-social welfare has evolved from the recognition that social policy and environmental sustainability are interdependent pillars of human well-being. Rooted in the European welfare tradition and ecological economics, the term emerged in response to the limitations of welfare models that prioritized economic growth over ecological integrity. Early welfare systems were designed to mitigate industrial-era risks such as unemployment, illness, and poverty, but they rarely accounted for environmental degradation or planetary boundaries [10]. As climate change and ecological crises have intensified, scholars and policymakers have increasingly argued for a paradigm that integrates environmental limits with social protection systems. Contemporary eco-social welfare approaches conceptualize sustainability not merely as an ecological goal but as a socially negotiated process that ensures equitable access to resources, resilience against ecological risks, and intergenerational justice [11]. This reconceptualization positions welfare institutions as proactive agents of green transformation,

capable of shaping behavioral change, promoting sustainable consumption, and fostering social solidarity amid environmental uncertainty [12].

At the core of eco-social thinking lies the principle of social sustainability, which emphasizes the continuity of human well-being within ecologically viable boundaries. Unlike economic or ecological sustainability, the social dimension focuses on the conditions that enable communities to thrive, equity, inclusion, trust, and participatory governance [13]. Social justice operates as the normative foundation of this dimension, guiding how the benefits and burdens of sustainability transitions are distributed among different societal groups. Equity and inclusion are significant in contexts where green policies generate uneven impacts across regions, genders, or income groups. Ensuring that vulnerable populations are not disproportionately affected by ecological transitions requires welfare systems that are adaptive, redistributive, and participatory [14]. Moreover, community well-being becomes a critical measure of sustainability success, highlighting the importance of localized engagement, shared responsibility, and the co-creation of solutions [15].

Green transformation has been interpreted through multiple policy paradigms, each reflecting distinct assumptions about the relationships among the economy, the environment, and society. Ecological modernization theory, dominant since the 1990s, suggests that technological innovation and market mechanisms can reconcile economic growth with environmental protection. While influential in shaping climate and energy policies, this paradigm often underplays the distributive and ethical dimensions of sustainability. In contrast, the just transition framework introduces a more explicitly social perspective, emphasizing fairness and inclusivity in managing the shift toward sustainable economies. Originating in labor movements and later adopted by international organizations such as the ILO and UNFCCC, the just transition paradigm seeks to protect workers, communities, and regions at risk of exclusion during decarbonization [16], [14]. Integrating eco-social welfare principles into this paradigm enriches it further by linking employment and social protection to broader welfare and equity objectives, ensuring that transition processes remain both ecologically sound and socially legitimate [17], [18], [19].

United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for aligning environmental and social objectives within global sustainability agendas. Several SDGs, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), embody the essence of eco-social integration [20], [21]. By linking social justice to environmental imperatives, the SDGs encourage governments to pursue green, inclusive, and equitable policies. This global agenda underscores the need for systemic coherence among social welfare, economic restructuring, and environmental governance [22], [23]. Embedding eco-social welfare within the SDG framework, therefore, represents both a normative and operational pathway for realizing a just and sustainable transformation at national and international levels.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in systematic document analysis to examine how eco-social welfare principles are articulated and operationalized within green transformation policies. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this inquiry, as it enables in-depth interpretation of complex policy discourses, institutional logics, and normative frameworks that cannot be adequately captured through predefined quantitative indicators.

The peer-reviewed academic literature addressing sustainability, welfare, and social justice was selected through purposive sampling to ensure its relevance to global green transition governance, social protection debates, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) implementation. Data analysis followed an inductive thematic coding strategy. In the first stage, the documents were subjected to open coding to identify recurring concepts related to welfare adaptation, social justice, governance, participation, and ecological risk. In the second stage, these initial codes were iteratively reviewed and grouped into higher-order thematic categories through constant comparison across policy and academic texts. The resulting thematic structure represents analytically consolidated domains rather than mechanically extracted frequencies.

To enhance analytical rigor and interpretive consistency, triangulation was applied across three interconnected sources: (i) global policy frameworks, (ii) academic literature, and (iii) the normative structure of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This triangulated reading allowed the study to assess the coherence between policy discourse, scholarly conceptualization, and global sustainability norms.

The study offers a conceptually grounded and policy-relevant analytical synthesis, aligned with its aim of developing an integrative eco-social policy perspective rather than testing causal relations.

4. Findings and Thematic Structure

4.1. Theme 1: Social Protection and Welfare Adaptation under Ecological Risk

First theme highlights the need to reconceptualize social protection systems in light of emerging ecological risks and environmental vulnerabilities. Traditional welfare frameworks have primarily addressed socioeconomic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and health insecurity. However, they are increasingly inadequate in responding to the new forms of risk generated by climate change and environmental degradation [24]. Redefining welfare to encompass ecological vulnerability requires a paradigm shift toward policies that anticipate and mitigate the social impacts of environmental crises, such as extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity, rather than treating them as external shocks. In this context, welfare institutions must evolve into instruments of ecological resilience, capable of supporting adaptive capacities at both the household and community levels. A key policy gap identified in this analysis concerns the insufficient integration of energy poverty and climate-induced displacement within existing welfare systems [25]. Many national frameworks still regard access to affordable energy as an economic issue rather than a component of social justice, leaving low-income households particularly vulnerable to the rising costs of clean energy transitions. Similarly, climate-induced migration and displacement remain peripheral in social protection agendas, despite their growing prevalence and socioeconomic implications [26], [27], [28]. Addressing these gaps requires welfare models that combine environmental foresight with inclusive safety nets, linking energy subsidies, green employment programs, and social insurance mechanisms to broader sustainability goals. Such an approach positions welfare not merely as a reactive safety system but as a proactive driver of equitable and resilient green transformation.

4.2. Theme 2: Inclusive Participation and Governance in Just Transition

Second theme underscores the centrality of inclusive participation and governance in ensuring that green transformation processes are socially just and democratically legitimate. Effective governance of sustainability transitions depends on technological efficiency, policy design, and the capacity of institutions to involve diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes [29]. Participatory governance serves as a mechanism for fair resource distribution, enabling affected communities to voice their concerns, shape policy priorities, and share in the benefits of ecological transformation [15]. By fostering transparency, accountability, and trust between policymakers and citizens, participatory structures help mitigate the perception that green policies impose top-down burdens on local populations. This inclusion strengthens procedural justice, the fairness of decision-making processes, which complements distributive justice in the broader framework of just transition. Empirical evidence from global sustainability practices illustrates how community-driven resilience strategies enhance both social and environmental outcomes. Local cooperatives, municipal energy initiatives, and community-based adaptation programs have demonstrated the potential of grassroots engagement in promoting sustainable livelihoods and localized climate solutions [30]. These initiatives diversify governance and empower communities to co-produce knowledge and develop context-specific responses to ecological risks. Embedding such participatory mechanisms within national and regional green transition policies ensures that transformation processes remain equitable, context-sensitive, and anchored in social

solidarity [31], [32]. Inclusive governance transforms citizens from passive recipients of policy outcomes into active agents of sustainable change.

4.3. Theme 3: Capacity Building and Communication for Eco-Social Resilience

The third theme emphasizes the importance of capacity building and communication as foundational pillars for fostering eco-social resilience in the context of green transformation. Beyond structural reforms and policy design, sustainable transitions depend on societies' ability to adapt, learn, and internalize new environmental and social norms. Capacity building involves developing the institutional, technical, and social competencies necessary to manage ecological risks and promote inclusive adaptation [33]. In this process, the disciplines of social work and communication play crucial mediating roles by facilitating behavioral change, encouraging participatory learning, and translating complex policy goals into accessible narratives that resonate with diverse communities. Social work contributes to resilience by strengthening social networks, empowering marginalized groups, and supporting vulnerable populations during ecological disruptions. At the same time, communication strategies enhance the dissemination of sustainability values and collective responsibility [34]. Equally significant are public trust and awareness, which emerge as key determinants of sustainability adoption and long-term behavioral transformation. Without trust in institutions and transparent communication channels, even well-designed green policies risk facing public resistance or misunderstanding [35]. Building trust requires continuous dialogue between policymakers, civil society, and communities to ensure that transition strategies reflect shared values and local realities. Public awareness campaigns, environmental education, and community-based initiatives serve as tools to foster this mutual understanding, helping individuals connect personal well-being with ecological responsibility [36], [22]. Strengthening communication and capacity building reinforces eco-social resilience by transforming sustainability from a policy objective into a shared cultural and social practice.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study point to a persistent structural disjunction between welfare systems and environmental governance, confirming that social protection has not evolved at a pace comparable to environmental and technological strategies of green transformation. With respect to RQ.1, which asks how welfare policies can adapt to ecological risks and green transition challenges, the results indicate that most existing welfare frameworks remain oriented toward traditional socioeconomic risks such as unemployment, income poverty, and health insecurity. This orientation is consistent with previous studies highlighting the limited integration of ecological vulnerability into welfare architectures [7], [26]. While recent literature increasingly recognizes energy poverty and climate-induced displacement as emerging social risks [25], [27], [28], analysis of global policy documents suggests that these issues remain marginal within mainstream social protection agendas. This finding aligns with earlier critiques that welfare adaptation to climate risks remains reactive rather than preventive [2], [8].

In relation to RQ.2, which examines the governance mechanisms that enable social justice within sustainability frameworks, the results corroborate the growing consensus that participatory governance is essential for the legitimacy of just transition processes. The findings resonate with studies emphasizing procedural justice, transparency, and stakeholder inclusion as core dimensions of equitable sustainability governance [15], [29]. At the same time, the comparative reading of international frameworks, particularly the European Union's Just Transition Mechanism and SDG implementation strategies, reveals important limitations. Although these frameworks formally endorse participation and social inclusion, their operationalization is often constrained by uneven institutional capacities, centralized decision-making structures, and limited local empowerment. This tension between participatory rhetoric and institutional practice has also been documented in community-level just transition research [31], [32], [30].

Addressing RQ.3, which focuses on the role of communication and participation in strengthening eco-social resilience, the findings highlight that capacity building is not merely a technical process but a deeply social and relational one. The results confirm previous work showing that social trust,

environmental awareness, and communicative engagement are decisive factors in shaping public acceptance of sustainability policies [34], [35]. Consistent with [36] and [22], the analysis indicates that communication becomes transformative when it moves beyond information transfer toward participatory learning and collective meaning-making. However, the policy documents reviewed tend to prioritize awareness-raising and behavioral messaging over long-term community empowerment and institutional learning capacities, suggesting a gap between communicative ambition and structural capacity-building.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the argument that the social dimension of sustainability remains institutionally underdeveloped despite its increasing visibility in both academic discourse and global policy agendas. The comparative alignment with existing literature demonstrates that the challenges identified in this study, welfare inertia, participatory asymmetries, and limited communicative empowerment, are not isolated anomalies but part of a broader structural pattern in contemporary sustainability governance. These results, therefore, contribute to ongoing debates on just transition and eco-social policy by emphasizing that the effectiveness and legitimacy of green transformation depend not only on technological innovation but also on the systematic integration of welfare adaptation, social justice, and participatory capacity into the core of sustainability governance.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1. Key Findings

This study demonstrates that the social dimension of green transformation remains institutionally fragile despite its growing visibility in sustainability discourse. The findings confirm that welfare systems remain structured primarily around traditional socioeconomic risks and have not yet undergone a comparable transformation to address emerging ecological vulnerabilities, such as energy poverty, climate-induced displacement, and green labor market disruptions. In parallel, governance frameworks formally acknowledge participation and social inclusion but often struggle to operationalize these principles in ways that ensure procedural and distributive justice. Finally, capacity building and communication emerge as critical yet unevenly institutionalized dimensions of eco-social resilience. At the same time, awareness-raising is widely promoted, but long-term community empowerment and participatory learning remain limited. Together, these results confirm that the legitimacy and sustainability of green transformation processes depend fundamentally on the systematic integration of welfare adaptation, social justice, and participatory capacity into the core of environmental governance.

6.2. Practical Implications for Stakeholder Groups

For national and regional policymakers, the findings underscore the need to embed social protection mechanisms directly into green transition strategies rather than treating them as afterthoughts. Energy pricing, housing, employment, and climate adaptation policies need to be systematically designed with distributive justice and social vulnerability assessments in mind to prevent the reproduction of structural inequalities during transition processes.

For welfare institutions and social policy actors, the results highlight the importance of expanding intervention frameworks to include ecological vulnerability, energy access, and climate-related displacement as central domains of practice. Welfare systems are positioned not merely as passive safety nets but as anticipatory institutions capable of strengthening societal resilience in the face of ecological risks.

For local governments and municipal administrations, the findings emphasize the strategic role of participatory governance and community-based implementation mechanisms in translating abstract sustainability goals into socially legitimate and context-sensitive practices. Local-level coordination among environmental, social, and economic policy units is a critical condition for equitable green transformation.

For civil society organizations and community-based initiatives, the study demonstrates that participatory governance is both a democratic norm and a functional prerequisite for social acceptance

and policy effectiveness. Grassroots engagement, co-production of knowledge, and community-led adaptation practices are shown to be essential for strengthening eco-social resilience.

For communication professionals and educators, the results indicate that sustainability-related communication must move beyond one-directional information dissemination toward participatory, trust-building, and empowerment-oriented approaches. Communication is shown to be a structural component of eco-social resilience insofar as it shapes public understanding, institutional trust, and collective learning processes in sustainability transitions.

For academic researchers and interdisciplinary scholars, the study offers a conceptually integrated perspective that connects welfare adaptation, governance, and communication within the broader literature on just transition and social sustainability. It provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical work aimed at operationalizing eco-social integration across different policy domains.

6.3. Future Research Directions

While this study provides a conceptually grounded synthesis of the eco-social dimensions of green transformation, further research is needed to test and refine these insights across different institutional and geographical contexts. Comparative empirical studies examining how welfare systems in different country groups respond to ecological risks would deepen understanding of context-specific adaptation pathways. Longitudinal research could also explore how participatory governance mechanisms evolve over time and whether they translate into durable social outcomes. In addition, future studies may investigate how communication strategies interact with social trust and behavioral change in climate and energy transitions, particularly in settings characterized by high social vulnerability and institutional fragility.

6.4. Call to Action

The evidence presented in this study points to an urgent need for policymakers, welfare institutions, and sustainability actors to rethink green transformation as an inherently social process rather than a predominantly technological or economic one. Advancing toward socially legitimate and resilient transitions requires that social justice, welfare adaptation, and participatory capacity be embedded at the heart of environmental governance. Without such integration, green transformation risks reproducing existing inequalities and generating new forms of vulnerability. A concerted shift toward eco-socially informed policy design, cross-sectoral collaboration, and inclusive governance is therefore not merely desirable but essential for ensuring that sustainability transitions remain both equitable and durable.

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