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Ecological transition and inequalities, a democratic challenge. Part three: Rebuilding trust on the path to transition: a first set of propositions

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Public policies aimed at initiating ecological transition usually invoke social justice as a precondition of success. However, social justice should not be understood only in an economic and negative sense, such as

protecting transition losers. It also has to propose a positive political project, which can help restore social trust. This blog post lays out a few proposals that head in that direction.

The concept of a just transition,¹ which has grown more popular in recent years, is usually concerned with the loss of employment caused by ecological transition and with preventing the economically most vulnerable populations from bearing the burden of transition. Redevelopment of sectors that will disappear due to ecological transition (eg, see [Sartor et al. \[2017\]](#) on the coal sector), and proposals for energy premiums, or cheques, redistributing some of the income from carbon taxes to the poorest households ([Saujot et al., 2019](#)), are examples of how this concept is made concrete within political recommendations.

Yet acceptance of the idea of a just transition is not enough considering the lack of trust most democratic societies face ([on this topic, see the second part of this series of blog posts](#)). A social and political progress project, generating commitment and democratic endorsement, must also be put forward. This means reviewing and adapting how transition is conducted, and what kinds of public action instruments are mobilised to make the ambition concrete and endorsement of the project within this political context possible.

Reaffirming transition as a collective project and not an individual responsibility

Nowadays, public action targeting lifestyles tends to make individuals (over)responsible for the collective effects of their behaviour, as evidenced by Dubuisson Quellier (2016) for example on the subject of sustainable consumption, which she examines as a problem of consumer behaviour. Framing public action in this way leads to the use of supposedly rational public policy instruments whose aims are to change individual behaviour. Accordingly, in the realm of food, the principal instruments used are information and awareness campaigns, and product labels and labelling. This approach tends to play down systemic determinants that strongly affect our eating habits: the influence of advertising,² economic incentives to consume cheap products of lower nutritional value, eating habits acquired since childhood, accessibility of better quality products, less time devoted to cooking, etc. Although an approach based on individual responsibility seems to have had particularly mixed results, specifically with the most vulnerable populations (see Herberg [2017] on the food industry in France), this approach can also be counterproductive. According to a survey conducted by Destin Commun, 39% of French people feel powerless when it comes to the state of the environment. Research has shown that whilst anger and hope can act as levers in creating endorsement among French people, powerlessness, just like sadness, operates more as an inhibitor (*Destin Commun*, 2020). Rather than adding individualisation to a society that is already suffering from it, the tools for a transition of lifestyles should above all seek to build collective projects.

Participation as a vector of commitment and legitimisation

In France, the Citizens' Convention on Climate (CCC) initiative has shown that it is possible to discuss models of desirable societies and agree democratically on measures to be implemented to achieve transition.³ The participation of citizens in public decision-making on transition seems to be proof of democratic justice; however, it is probably also evidence of long-term effectiveness, since it could enable decisions to be legitimised⁴ in people's eyes, especially in the context of the lack of trust that we described in the second part of this series of posts. The unprecedented experiment of the CCC is an encouraging initiative to build on and use as inspiration for expanding participation when thinking about ecological transition. The participation of citizens in public decision-making is not only a legal question, it is a way of making progress on the core issues and proposing useful recommendations for implementing transition.

This effort at participation must also take place in the world of business. [Fleurbæy et al. \(2019\)](#) shows that greater representation of workers on the boards of large companies would lead to a more equitable distribution of profits, and to taking better account of workers' interests in governance choices.⁵

Relying on trusted third parties

In the second part of this series we argued for the need to take account of the challenges posed by the lack of trust in implementation of transition policies. In this strategic reflection, the question of trusted third parties, who can be relied on to conduct transition, is key. Therefore, it seems indispensable to use local actors, mayors⁶ especially, but all local actors, including community actors and public services, as well as professionals in direct contact with the population. The [Rac-Solagro study](#) (2019) describes all the actors that need to be trained in sustainable food systems (general practitioners, paediatricians, nurses, orderlies, social workers, etc.), and the institutions that need to be mobilised (public health insurance companies, social action community centres). Such a scattered intervention strategy nevertheless raises significant implementation challenges in terms of identifying, gaining commitment from and coordinating the right actors in each region.⁷

Finally, in recent years we have seen the emergence of new actors, who use the potential provided by digital technology and the generalised use of smartphones to create new services. Open Food Facts has created an open data database compiling ingredients for hundreds of thousands of food products from crowd-sourced data; the Yuka food app uses this database to provide a rating system for food and cosmetic products, based on a photograph of bar codes on food products. This app has been extremely successful⁸ and aims to become an individualised collective action tool (Soutjis, 2020), where aggregated individual consumer choices pressure manufacturers to change their products. Even though it is still too soon to assess the impact on manufacturing practices, there is no doubt that these new actors are shaking up⁹ the established rules of the game between manufacturers who have had a (quasi) monopoly of information on products and governments that sometimes cannot impose regulations that satisfy consumers.

What can we learn from this three-post analysis? To go further in implementing transition, it seems crucial to take greater account of actual conditions in society. Although traditionally actions implemented to conduct climate transition have gone through a technical and economic filter to assess their relevance and feasibility – how much emission reduction at what cost? – new filters must be added, now more than ever. How do planned measures interact in a context of inequality and mistrust? Will there be reduced implementation capacity? How can they contribute to improving the situation? Only under this condition will ecological transition move from political ambition to social implementation.

¹ See for example the work of the High Council on Climate, November 2020 webinar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWdLo92jkSw> .

² According to a recent study by Santé Publique France, more than half the advertising seen by children and adolescents involve D and E foods on the Nutri-Score, i.e., those with the most fat, salt and sugar. https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2020/06/26/la-moitie-des-publicites-alimentaires-vues-par-les-enfants-concerne-des-produits-gras-sucre-et-sales_6044210_3244.html .

³ Furthermore, the proposals of the CCC seem to be accepted by the population, see <https://reseauactionclimat.org/sondage-des-gaulois-pas-si-refractaires-a-l'action-climatique/> or <http://www.odoxa.fr/sondage/mesures-de-convention-citoyenne-seduisent-francais-a-lexception-notable-110-km-h/> .

⁴ See the interview with Loïc Blondiaux, Professor of Political Science and member of the CCC's Governance Committee. <https://www.publicsenat.fr/article/politique/convention-citoyenne-les-elus-ne-peuvent-plus-revendiquer-le-monopole-de-la> .

⁵ This outcome is also found in other research: see for example CEPIL's recent Policy Brief, which shows the link between workers' representation on the boards of large companies and the localisation/delocalisation of the activities of multinationals.

6 The CEVIPOF annual barometer estimates that only 30% of French people trust the national government. However, this lack of trust is greatly reduced when it comes to local political leaders, as 60% of French people say they trust the mayor of their municipality.

7 However, there are institutional channels for implementing this kind of policy, for example the Food Policy Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture, responsible for implementing national food policy in local communities and the State's deconcentrated services.

8 According to Yuka's Wikipedia page, the app has been downloaded more than 15 million times and is used by 5.5 million users every month (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuka_%28application%29).

9 See, for example, the reaction of the Fédération française des industriels charcutiers traiteurs (FICT – French Federation of Prepared Meat Industries) to the work of Yuka and Foodwatch. <https://www.foodwatch.org/fr/actualites/2020/nitrites-le-lobby-de-la-charcuterie-industrielle-tente-de-nous-baillonner/> .

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