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For a better integration of social insights in the future French National Low-Carbon Strategy (SNBC)

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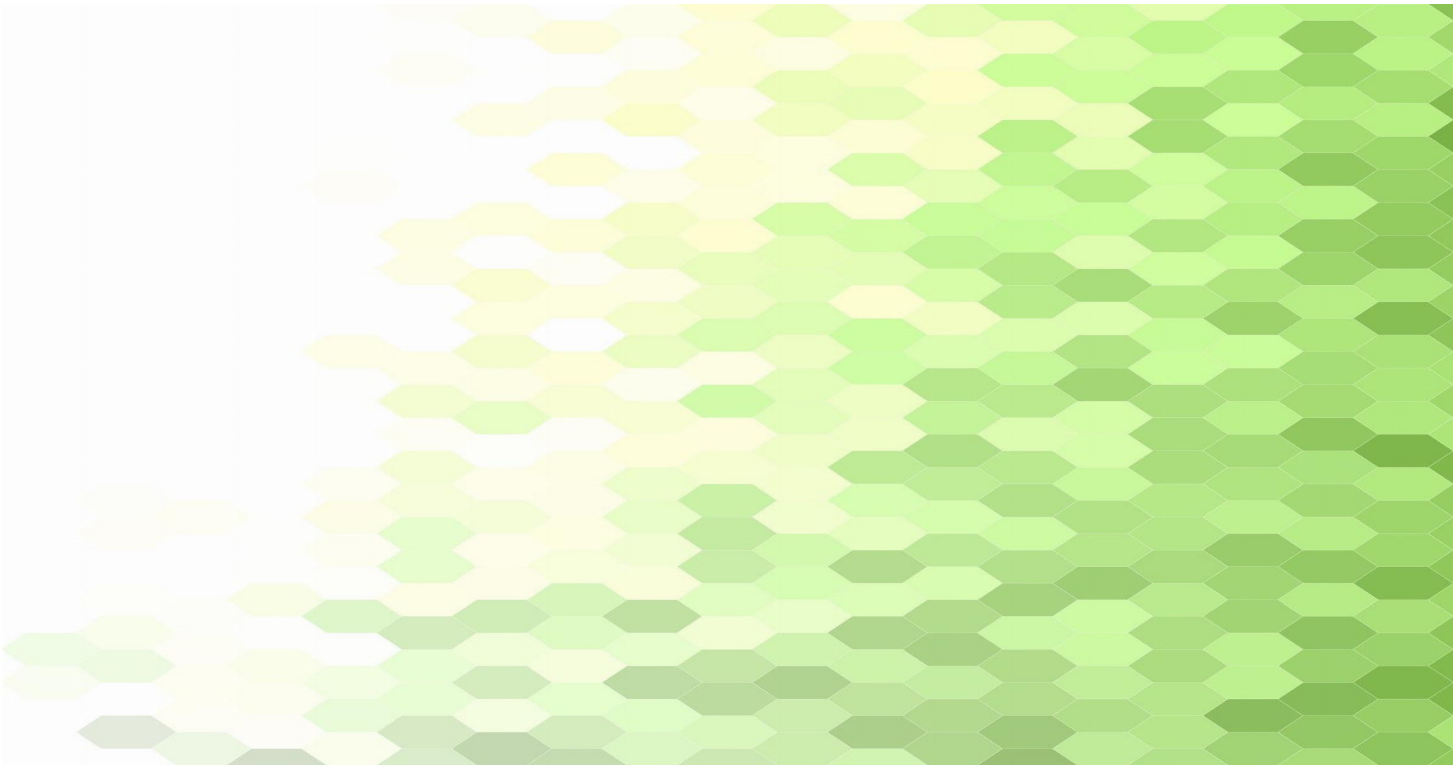

Who are we? A group of experts and researchers, coming from various backgrounds, disciplines and organizations (research, consulting firms, administration, think tanks, companies, etc.), exchanging for more than a year on the challenges of a better integration of social dimensions and especially lifestyles in the energy-climate prospective. We wish to use this collective experience to contribute to the design of the future French National Low-Carbon Strategy (SNBC).

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Why it is essential

The ecological transition is a project of social, political, technical and economic transformation that interacts with a society in perpetual motion, driven by individual and collective forces (groups, institutions, modes of regulation, etc.), and having its own dynamics in its forms of social organization, its values, its links to technologies, etc. At this stage of the definition of a decarbonization strategy for France, it is critical to better consider, upstream, the social dimension of the transition: the social structures and mechanisms at work that can promote, modify or oppose its implementation, those that must be guided and those that must be debated, which are numerous, given the novelty of the exercise. The social dimension of change remains a weak point in energy-climate forecasts. Today, the rise of these issues on the political agenda is an opportunity to integrate social analysis more widely into the SNBC process.

In this perspective, it is worth noting that the SNBC2 was a first step: changes in behavior and lifestyles have been identified as elements of the trajectory to be implemented (food practices, consumption, mobility, housing, etc.), but without this being fully explored, debated and connected to public policies, despite an initial exercise of translation into Vision de la France neutre en carbone et respectueuse du vivant en 2050, a foresight exercise carried out subsequently under the aegis of the Conseil national de la transition écologique (CNTE) in 2020. Several recent developments also encourage this deepening of the social dimension: the scientific literature is increasingly active on the issue of social and lifestyle changes in the context of decarbonation and a new chapter of the future IPCC report will be dedicated to these issues (Chapter 5 - 'Demand, services and social aspects of mitigation'). The establishment of the High Council for Climate has also highlighted the importance of social issues and provided a framework for addressing these questions, which also appear in a reinforced manner and in different ways in the work being carried out by RTE and Ademe, the NegaWatt association and recently by EPE. Finally, the SNBC is increasingly being mobilized as a reference vision by a variety of actors in society, well beyond the sphere of technical expertise, and the design of this third strategy will certainly be more widely debated, especially coming after the Citizens' Convention for Climate and in a context of strong media coverage of climate issues. In order to allow this movement of appropriation and debate, it is essential to improve the consideration of social changes.

How to address the issue and what to avoid

Based on our various experiences, we propose a way to approach the social dimensions in foresight studies. There are indeed "pitfalls" to be avoided, which are linked to the risks of misunderstanding between communities and disciplines, starting with the terms used, and to the methodological framework that has been progressively built up to carry out energy-climate foresight, a framework that is well adapted to technical-economic analysis but much less so to social analysis.

The first trap to be avoided is to think of the social dimension as an isolated brick, which could be dispensed with but which today, by limiting it to the idea of "sufficiency" in a restrictive sense, must be mobilized in a hurry in order to pass the neutrality test. In this perspective, it is thus mobilized in a logic of addition to the technical solutions (e.g. variant of the main scenario with assumptions of behavioral changes in addition). Nor should it be limited to the "accounting" issue of calibrating the input hypotheses of quantitative modelling (e.g. number of kilometers travelled, number of kcal consumed, heating temperature, etc.), which amounts to associating probable or desirable values without necessarily examining the question of the implementation strategy.

This leads to the second trap: considering the technical and social dimensions separately, when they should not be opposed or thought of separately, as these changes are interdependent. Think, for example, of the evolution of the diet, which both structures and is structured by the organization of agricultural production and the associated changes. It is at this intersection that the political choices inherent in the definition of the strategy are situated, as illustrated by the work of the Citizens' Convention.

A final trap is to consider lifestyles, one of the dimensions of social analysis, through the prism of individual action alone, whereas this concept refers instead to the collective frameworks (social norms, technical infrastructures, economic rules) that organize and structure them, and which must therefore be changed.

Social analysis must feed the political debate, i.e. contribute to identifying strategic alternatives and the conditions for their implementation. Exploring the social dimension, which requires a greater involvement of the human and social sciences in the work, means examining the modes of organization (e.g. mobility system), the structural relationships (e.g. market regulation), and the systemic constraints (e.g. the time budget) that will make a transition scenario possible or, on the contrary, oppose it, in order to understand the possible alternatives and the ways of implementing change. It is therefore fundamentally a way of feeding, challenging and confronting all the technical and economic hypotheses with social reality and providing an assessment that will make the SNBC more robust and more capable of being a steering tool. It must therefore be thought out from the outset and not just downstream.

For example, a classic approach to decarbonization of the building sector is to formulate a set of hypotheses concerning technical solutions and associated policies, and to ask questions downstream about the resulting behavioral dimension of the technical scenario—for example, how to ensure that the population respects a certain heating temperature?—a question that is generally not satisfactorily answered. Another way of doing this would be to integrate elements such as: the adequacy between the housing stock and the structure of the households; the different representations of thermal comfort; the diversity of the social situation in one's dwelling, including fuel poverty; the constraints in the organization of the housing market and the associated public policies, etc., in order to feed the definition of the technical and political possibilities.

How could we proceed and organize this work within the framework of the SNBC process?

While the technical and economic analysis of the transition has been in progress for decades, the social analysis is more recent. Much remains to be done and not everything can be dealt with in this SNBC3. We make four concrete proposals on what we believe to be the most critical to be produced in the context of a particular effort put on the social dimension.

- **Ensure the representation of the human and social sciences (HSS).** One condition for the realization of our proposals is to encourage a real presence of this knowledge in the work of the working groups, albeit not usual for energy-climate foresight studies. Traditionally confined at the end of the exercise to questions of behavioral change and acceptance of public policy measures, HSS have a role to play in identifying the necessary transformations. Even before shedding light on the conditions for new social practices and collective actions in favor of the climate, HSS make it possible to shed light on the organizational, institutional, and political factors that frame the actions of individuals, groups, and organizations in order to know what needs to change in order to achieve climate and environmental objectives.
- **Build a shared vision of future social transformations.** These transformations, which include, for example, the evolution of metropolization, digitalization, the structure of inequalities, and the demographic structure, are often blind spots in these foresight exercises. We suggest identifying upstream in the process the social

transformations that would benefit from being made explicit by the scenario and made coherent, transversally and at the sectoral level, as well as the associated uncertainties.

- **Mapping the social issues of the transition.** Revealing and prioritizing the most critical components of the transition can help reinforce the robustness of the strategy. These critical components are changes or conditions that are essential to the steering and implementation of the transition in its various sectors but for which the social analysis would reveal significant questions and uncertainties (e.g. inequality of access to transition solutions; changes in food and mobility systems and practices; inequality of carbon footprint; renovation decision within condominiums; role of advertising). This work should be carried out upstream, on the basis of the SNBC2 and the work of the other sectoral working groups, in order to draw up this assessment, which could then be shared and discussed to feed the work of each group. These components would also be analyzed in depth and highlighted for possible political trade-offs or citizen choices when this goes beyond the legitimacy of experts (e.g., questions of equity, values, collective preferences).
- **Contribute to a better description of the operationalization conditions.** The SNBC has two main components (the modeled scenario, and the narratives and public policies that describe the implementation). Downstream, this social insight could play a pivotal role between the two, allowing the technical and quantified scenario to be confronted with the filter of social analysis, allowing for better anticipation and translation into public policy tools. This analysis of the conditions of realization would strengthen the role of the SNBC as a reference framework for steering the transition, a contribution at least as important as influencing the quantified scenario. In this work, the specific question of identifying and discussing the levers for transforming lifestyles could also be based on the analysis carried out by the Citizens' Convention for Climate.

To continue to feed this reflection, which involves significant methodological and scientific difficulties and for which much remains to be done, we will publish a guide by the end of the year that brings together contributions from a variety of actors and avenues to move towards better consideration of the social dimension in foresight exercises.

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