



■ Bridging decarbonization and labour market in sustainability transitions

## Deliverable D.2.3.2.

### Research report on transitions governance case analyses

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| <b>Submission date</b>     | 01/09/2025  |
| <b>Dissemination level</b> | Private   |
| <b>Keywords</b>            | decarbonization, labour market, social dialogue, policy integration |



This project has received funding from Belspo BRAIN-be 2.0 programme under grant agreement No B2/202/P3

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# **Social Dialogue and Policy Integration: Navigating Complexity in Transition Governance in Belgium**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper explores the role of social dialogue in promoting horizontal policy integration across climate, employment, and social domains, focusing on the case of Belgium. Anchored in policy integration theory and reflexive governance, it examines how traditional institutions of social concertation are adapting to the complexity of just transitions. Drawing on documentary analysis and interviews with stakeholders, the study finds that while Belgian social dialogue has incorporated climate goals into its framing—through the growing use of “just transition” narratives—this has not translated into full integration across subsystems and policy instruments. Integration is constrained by limited representation, fragmentation of institutions, and distributed power among heterogeneous actors. Nonetheless, social dialogue offers mechanisms for managing ambivalence, uncertainty, and dispersed authority through inclusive negotiation, adaptive deliberation, and procedural instruments. The paper concludes that while social dialogue can support integration and reflexivity, full policy alignment remains elusive and may not be entirely desirable, given the trade-offs between inclusivity, coherence, and efficacy.

## **1. Introduction:**

Achieving sustainability within planetary boundaries requires substantial changes in how we produce and consume (Lee et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström et al., 2009) and this transformation will affect labour markets.

Acknowledging the potential social impacts of climate mitigation and adaptation measures, the European Green Deal adopted in 2019 included pledges to "leave no-one behind" (European Commission, 2019). In light of the distributional aspects of climate policy, the Council Recommendation on "Ensuring a Fair Transition towards Climate Neutrality", adopted on 16 June 2022 recognizes that "social partners have a vital role to play in contributing to addressing, through dialogue, the employment and social consequences of the challenges of the green transition" and promotes a "whole-of-society approach to the fair transition" that is based on the involvement of social partners at all levels and stages, as well as participation of civil society and stakeholders.

The recommendation invites Member States to "actively involve social partners at national, regional and local levels, while respecting their autonomy, in all stages of policymaking and implementation (...), including through social dialogue and collective bargaining where appropriate; in addition, promote further the full involvement of social partners in the design and implementation of transition pathways for industrial ecosystems". However, the recommendation is vaguely worded and leaves much room to member states in their approach to include social partners.

Over the past decade, Belgian federal authorities have developed targets, scenarios, and plans to transition towards a low-carbon economy, aligned with European strategies and international agreements. Simultaneously, a core aim has been to increase employment rates and foster labour market opportunities. In line with the EU Green Deal ambitions, policy and institutional developments during the last legislatures in Belgium have attempted to increase the level of integration between climate policies and economic, employment and social policy sectors. This integration attempts build on various processes of concertation and participation of workers, companies and citizens through existing or new social dialogue institutions and fora. The federal government asked the federal councils to provide joint recommendations on the National Energy and Climate Plans and launched an extensive societal dialogue on the "Just Transition" ahead of a National Conference on Just Transition as agreed in the government agreement. The General Estates for a Just Transition brought together a wide range of stakeholders including scientists, employers, trade unions, NGOs, associations, government experts and citizens through consultation of federal councils and ad-hoc fora.

While the focus of precedent work studying Belgian climate governance has focused on vertical policy integration between government levels (Fermeglia, 2023; Happaerts, 2015), we attempt to understand if and how recent developments in the social dialogue in Belgium have been able

to provide horizontal policy integration across climate, economic, and social policy sectors. It is expected that this case can shed light on the role of social dialogue in coordinating policies towards a just transition, as ambitious by the EU Green Deal and Council's and Commission's Communications (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2019, 2020).

## **1.1. Theoretical frame: policy integration and reflexive governance**

Within policy literature, policy integration usually refers to the integration and coordination between policy levels (vertical) and sectors (horizontal). At the same time, transitions scholars have shown the complexity and uncertainty of sustainable transitions challenge the usual linear and rationalist governance approach (Voss et al., 2006). Ambiguity of social goals, uncertainty about causes and effects relations, and constant feedback between decision-making and social, ecological, and technological developments highlights the limits of rigid analysis, and linear approaches that link predetermined outcomes with planning (Newig et al., 2013). The specific features of these problems call for replacing traditional, hierarchical, and deterministic governance approaches with more flexible and interactive ones labelled as reflexive (Voss et al., 2006) or experimentalist (Sabel & Victor, 2022) governance models. That reflexive turn within governance calls for extending decision-making and consultation processes beyond the usual policy domain to include representatives of businesses, civil society, citizens, and other stakeholders.

Interested in the efficacy of policies, public policy scholars have stressed the importance of policy coherence and integration (Candel, 2021; Cejudo & Michel, 2017; Howlett & Rayner, 2007). The assumption of policy integration proponents is that concerted policy efforts, across sectors (horizontal) and levels of government (vertical), are more effective in achieving desired outcomes than fragmented approaches.

Integration challenges arise when transversal and complex issues are confronted with hierarchic and siloed governance systems with stable actors and associated interests and understandings of the problem. Policy integration has primarily been used in the context of environmental policy, with the aim to incorporate and prioritize environmental issues in non-environmental policy sectors (Lafferty & Hovden, 2003).

Rather than seeing policy integration as a desired state - from which the desirability can also be questioned (Candel, 2021) – we follow authors that conceptualize it as an ongoing process (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016; Cejudo & Michel, 2021). Candel & Biesbroek (2016) developed a

conceptual framework of policy integration as a multi-dimensional and ongoing process. Their conceptual framework suggests analyzing policy integration along four dimensions: (1) policy frame, (2) subsystem involvement, (3) policy goals, and (4) policy instruments.

The policy frame dimension deals with the cognitive and normative perception of a particular problem within a governance system. The integration level in this dimension assesses to what extent a cross-cutting issue is perceived as such and requires a coordinated or integrated governance approach.

The policy goals dimension refers to explicit policy objectives (short and long-term) which impact or are impacted by the cross-cutting policy problem at hand. It covers the range of policies which refers to the cross-cutting problem and the coherence between policy goals. Coherence can be improved by attenuating policy externalities on the cross-cutting issue and/or building synergies between policy domains that address this issue.

The sub-system involvement dimension deals with the range of actors and institutions in the governance of the defined policy problem. This dimension captures several elements: 1) which subsystems are explicitly making policy efforts in terms of the problem (agenda-setting, debates, communication, etc. 2) the density of interactions between various subsystems to address the policy problem through procedural instruments such as invitation to develop legislation proposals, impact assessments, inter-service consultations, etc.

The policy instruments dimension refers to methods through which collective action is structured to address the cross-cutting problem. Substantive instruments allocate resources and authority to directly affect the distribution of the goods and services provided in society. Procedural instruments modify the government’s own policy processes to indirectly affect policy outcomes. Policy integration in policy instruments refers to 1) the deployment of policy instruments addressing the cross-cutting issue in the various policy sub-systems (2) procedural instruments at system-level (overarching plans and strategies, legislative and constitutional provisions, consultation mechanisms, impact assessments, etc. And (3) the consistency of the instrument mix (from weak consistency to negative coordination i.e., mitigating the externalities of subsystems’ instruments, and to positive coordination, i.e., seeking synergies between instruments).

**Table 1: Dimensions of policy (dis)integration, adapted from Candel, 2021**

| Dimension | Description | Degrees (Range) |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------|
|-----------|-------------|-----------------|

|                                    |  |  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>1. Policy Frame &amp; Goals</b> | Focuses on how a crosscutting issue is understood (framed) and how widely and coherently it is addressed in policies.      | From narrow, siloed definitions and isolated policy goals to broad, system-wide recognition and coherent, integrated goals.      |
| <b>2. Subsystem Involvement</b>    | Refers to the inclusion and coordination of various actor networks and institutional subsystems in addressing the issue.   | From isolated efforts by a single subsystem to full involvement and interaction across all relevant subsystems.                  |
| <b>3. Policy Instruments</b>       | Examines the tools used to address the issue, including their alignment, coordination mechanisms, and overall consistency. | From a few uncoordinated tools with low coherence to a well-aligned, system-wide instrument mix supported by coordination tools. |

Beyond the need for policy integration for governing complex problems, transition scholars and other political scientists have highlighted that the complexity and uncertainty of sustainability issues also challenges linear and rationalist governance approaches (Newig et al., 2013; Sabel & Victor, 2022; Voss et al., 2006). Governance models that tackle wide and cross-cutting issues therefore must cope with three fundamental issues that stretch across the definition and analysis of collective problems (policy frame), the definition of solutions and goals, and the elaboration of action strategies and/or instruments (Voss et al., 2006):

**Ambivalence:** Integrating decarbonization of the economy with social and employment policies is a political and normative exercise that requires trading off different social goals against each other. The ambivalence of goals can manifest itself in acute and clear conflict of goals among actors with different values, interests, and contexts. In addition, the ambivalence of goals might emerge when collectively agreed goals are vaguely defined in terms of focus, quantification, and timescale. In this case, the goals might carry unresolved disputes (Newig et al., 2013).

**Uncertainty:** Socio-ecological interactions and many cross-cutting policy problems are complex in nature, transgresses traditional scientific disciplines and cognitive models. This is due to the heterogeneity of interacting factors from the nature, society and technology, to the density of interconnections between these various elements and to the considerable amount and various types of feedback loops it generates (time lags, indirect effects, path dependencies, etc.) (Newig et al., 2013)

**Distributed power:** Whether goals are coherent and clearly formulated and whether the knowledge of the policy problem and system is well developed, the question of implementing policy solutions through strategies and instruments remains difficult. First, such strategies

might require radical change within social, economic and technical structures. Second, the capacities to influence the socio-economic and technical structures are distributed among a wide range of heterogeneous actors that do not share the same perceptions, values, and interests (Meadowcroft, 2007, 2011).

To address complexity in governance, Newig & al. (2013) developed a typology of measures to cope with complexity in the ambivalence of goals, uncertainty of knowledge, and distribution of power. The typology structures around five levels of reflexivity: 1) map out complexity; 2) harness complexity; 3) accommodate complexity; 4) contain complexity; 5) overcome complexity. Explored simultaneously, policy integration and reflexive governance approaches provide strategies to tackle complexity that stretch along a continuum from no integration to full integration and correspond to different levels of efficiency and resource use. Mapping the diversity of goals doesn't eliminate ambivalence but helps make it more intelligible. Opening up public and political debate can harness this ambivalence by sustaining collective reflection on differing values and trade-offs. Ambivalence can also be accommodated by pursuing multiple policy options simultaneously, each reflecting different trade-offs, with periodic revision through renewed debate. Alternatively, it can be pragmatically contained through legitimate political procedures—such as majority voting—or overcome through processes of mediation and deliberation that foster consensus on shared goals.

## **1.2. Climate change, labour markets and the role of social dialogue**

Climate change appears as a major complex and cross-cutting issue requiring integrated policies. More specifically, the decarbonization of production and consumption will have a significant impact on the labour market. The aggregated effect of decarbonization on employment is expected to be limited as there is a relatively small number of carbon-intensive jobs in the EU. However, while, at an aggregate level, the impact is expected to be limited, important distributional effects at individual, regional and sectoral level are foreseen (European Parliament Research Service, 2024).

Given the expected impacts of the transition on labour markets, workers and employers are therefore essential stakeholders to be included in the governance of the transitions to integrate labour and climate policies. In addition, social dialogue is needed as transitions require to create and maintain compromises related to the changes to operate in the economy, both in the demand

(consumption side) and supply (production side). Social dialogue therefore has the potential to be a key element for coordinating and integrating decarbonization and socio-economic policies.

One of the original mandates of social dialogue in Belgium and the EU was to address the distribution of productivity gains. This shift towards productivity came at a time when the structure of the economy was changing. Heavy and extractive industries, such as mining, whose competitiveness depended on low wages, were losing importance, and the Marshall Plan paved the way for a Fordist economic model in which competitiveness was based on economic expansion, rising wages and purchasing power through constant productivity gains (Luyten, 2023).

The Fordist compromise has come to an end. Economic growth is slowing down; the distribution of its fruits is no longer linked to productivity gains. The room of manoeuvre for social dialogue is limited by economic constraints such as financial pressure, international competition, and the distance between work and decision centres. Moreover, it is confronted with the need to keep the economy within planetary boundaries (Lee et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström et al., 2009).

Policy integration of socio-economic, labour and decarbonization policies requires to deal with the ambivalence in societal goals that arises from acute and clear conflict among actors with different values and interests. Simultaneously, ambivalence emerges also when collectively agreed goals are too vaguely defined (sustainability, just transition). In the past, social dialogue institutions and mechanisms have provided a place to deal with the ambivalence between distributive and social issues and economic development. Just as the post-Second World War social settlement added distributive and social issues to the economic and security functions of the state, so now would sustainability functions be added and addressed (Gough, 2016) therefore possibly extending the mandate of social dialogue.

However, the climate and environmental dimension of sustainability requires compromises that go beyond the topics social partners have normally focused on in the past. Social dialogue traditionally aimed at compromises that directly affect those represented in the negotiations, while in the case of climate policy the consequences are less immediate, and the interests of parties not directly represented at the negotiation table also need to be taken into account (EC, 2019b). Our case study explores the extent to which social dialogue in Belgium has been able to provide horizontal policy integration across climate, employment, and social policy sectors.

It is expected that this case can shed light on the role of social dialogue in coordinating policies towards a just transition.

## **2. Materials and Methods:**

This research aims to understand the role of social dialogue in integrating policies towards a just transition. To do so, it aims to connect theoretical streams of policy integration from the public policy literature with the reflexive governance approach developed in the transition studies literature. The theoretical discussion is illustrated through empirical material from the specific case of Belgium. The single case study analysis has been chosen for its ability to keep a nuanced, empirically rich, and holistic account of the subject.

Belgium serves as a representative case within the European context for examining the interplay between social concertation and integrated environmental, social, and economic governance. Its conservative-corporatist model of industrial relations (Esping-Andersen, 1990), grounded in strong tripartite institutions, reflects broader patterns found across Europe, where social dialogue is central to managing socio-economic policy. This institutionalized approach resonates with the European Union's emphasis on inclusive governance and just transition frameworks under the European Green Deal, making Belgium a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities inherent in balancing decarbonization with social equity.

In Belgium, trade unions, employers' organizations, and public institutions are integral to the governance of employment relationships, working conditions, and industrial relations. Belgium has one of Europe's highest union membership rates. Nearly all Belgian workers are covered by collective agreements, even those not union-affiliated. Belgium follows a hierarchy of standards in collective bargaining, with negotiations occurring at various levels (national, regional, sectoral). These result in collective labor agreements that govern working conditions and wages.

Belgium's federal system of social and civil dialogue is therefore highly institutionalized and multi-dimensional. It operates across different levels of intensity (information, consultation, and collective bargaining) and can take the form of bipartite relations between employers and trade unions, and tripartite relations involving government participation.

Federal level social and civil dialogue bodies include:

- The Group of Ten (*Groupe des Dix / Groep van Tien*): A negotiation platform bringing together the largest employer organizations and trade union confederations. It primarily deals with collective bargaining, notably on interprofessional agreements (IPA).
- The National Labour Council (*Conseil National du Travail / Nationale Arbeidsraad, CNT/NAR*): A permanent bipartite advisory body. It issues consultative opinions on labor law reforms and can conclude collective labor agreements (*conventions collectives de travail / collectieve arbeidsovereenkomsten, CCT/CAO*).
- The Central Economic Council (*Conseil Central de l'Économie / Centrale Raad voor het Bedrijfsleven, CCE/CRB*): A bipartite institution that provides information and consultative advice on economic competitiveness, productivity, wage evolution, and price trends. It is key in establishing the wage norm for collective bargaining rounds.

Beyond these institutions, the rise of environmental concern and the emergence of the concept of sustainable development in the 1990s led to the foundation of a Federal Council for Sustainable Development in 1997 (*Conseil Fédéral du Développement Durable / Federale Raad voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling CFDD/FRDO*). It is a broader tripartite and civil dialogue forum, bringing together employer and worker representatives alongside representatives of environmental organizations, development cooperation organizations, consumer, youth organizations and the scientific community. It primarily fulfils an informative and consultative role on various aspects of sustainable development policy and acts as a forum for policy dialogue between civil society groups and the government. Additionally, ad hoc tripartite consultation or negotiations processes may occur. This can happen when the government directly involves social partners in key policymaking decisions (e.g., pension reforms, labor market reforms).

[We have started our analysis with a literature review on policy integration and the function and history of social dialogue in Belgium] (Arcq, 2013; Cassiers & Denayer, 2010; Foucault & Groux, 2023; Léonard, 2023; Luyten, 2023).

In addition, several opinions formulated by the federal social dialogue councils dealing with transition issues and bridging decarbonization and socio-economic policies were analyzed (CCE-CRB, 2025; CCE-CRB & CFDD-FRDO, 2024; CCE-CRB & CNT-NAR, 2023; CCPD-ABCO, 2023; CFDD-FRDO, 2023c, 2023a, 2023b, 2024b, 2024a; CFDD-FRDO et al., 2023).

Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with representative members of federal social dialogue councils (i.e. trade unions, employers' organizations, environmental organizations and

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policymakers) to collect their perceptions of the ongoing changes within social dialogue, the challenges they raise for its relevance, and the potential avenues for an institutional reconfiguration of the social dialogue. 10 interviews were conducted between October 2024 and February 2025.

**Table 2 : Types of organizations and social dialogue institutions represented in interviews**

| #  | Organization type                                | Member of the social dialogue council:                                 |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | Trade Union                                      | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 2  | Employer's organization                          | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 3  | Researcher                                       | /  |
| 4  | Civil Society organization and Climate Coalition | Federal Council for Sustainable Development                            |
| 5  | Trade Union                                      | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 6  | Government (Climate ministry cabinet)            | /  |
| 7  | Federal Council secretariat                      | Federal Council for Sustainable Development                            |
| 8  | Employer's organization                          | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 9  | Regional Council secretariat                     | Walloon Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE)             |
| 10 | Environmental organization                       | Federal Council for Sustainable Development                            |

### **3. Results:**

#### **3.1. Social Dialogue and integration across dimensions:**

##### **3.1.1. Policy frame and goals**

The policy frame dimension deals with the cognitive and normative perception of a particular problem within a governance system. Integration at this level happens when a cross-cutting issue is perceived as such and requires a coordinated or integrated governance approach. The policy goals dimension refers to explicit policy objectives (short and long-term) which impact or are impacted by the cross-cutting policy problem at hand.

Social dialogue contributes to shaping the policy frame that increasingly connects socio-economic issues with environmental and climate ones. In recent years, the concept of just transition percolated from within the labour movement to international social dialogue institutions (ILO, 2015) to EU policies (European Commission, 2020). At Belgian level, the 2020 government agreement intended to “make environmental transition a transversal and constant concern” which shall be “based on a large concertation” (Belgian Federal Government, 2020). To achieve this, and in line with the agreement, the government organized a National Conference on Just Transition. This process included the consultation of federal social dialogue councils and the organization of an ad-hoc dialogue process: the Just Transition Forum. The Forum extended the representation beyond traditional social partners to also include development cooperation organisations, environmental organisations, anti-poverty organisations.

In its opinion feeding the Just Transition Forum, the Federal Council for Sustainable Development refers to the ILO definition of Just Transition: “A just transition means promoting a green economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned – workers, enterprises and communities – by creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. A just transition involves maximizing the social and economic opportunities of climate and environmental action, while minimizing and carefully managing any challenges, including through effective social dialogue and stakeholder engagement and respect for the fundamental principles and rights at work.” (ILO, 2023, p. 12).

Beyond the definition of Just Transition, there is some evidence of integration of climate objectives by traditional social partners and within current social dialogue structures. The Central Economic Council developed its strategy around 3P (People, Planet et Prosperity) and the major unions in Belgium joined the Climate Coalition with environmental NGO's and other civil society actors.

While interviews revealed that it has taken some time to have the main employers' organization agreeing with the concept of Just Transition as defined by the ILO, it appears as the basis of all the federal social dialogue councils' opinions reviewed. This reveals that, at the policy frame level, the joint pursuit of climate, social and economic targets is recognized in the form of an overarching framework of "Just Transition". Documents and interviews alike insist on the need to improve coordination and integration between the various policy goals of a just transition by attenuating policy externalities on the cross-cutting issue and/or building synergies between policy domains that address this issue.

### **3.1.2. Policy subsystems**

Interestingly, while the policy frame has evolved and policy instruments that are negotiated within social dialogue can also serve to integrate environmental objectives within socio-economic policy, it seems that further integration between these policy sectors and objectives is limited by issues of distributed power, fragmentation and limited integration within the sub-system dimension.

Social dialogue can be defined as a particular form of democracy that aims to build the general interest through a process of confrontation between interests constituted as "body" (Supiot, 2010 as cited in Gazier & Bruggeman, 2024). Ambivalence of policy goals, within social dialogue, is therefore managed by selected organisations that are expected to aggregate interests, reach compromise and ensure its implementation, even at the expense of specific revendications. The selected organisations are considered representative of the economic actors, labour and capital. The representativity of actors is also a means to address the issue of distributed power and ensure stakeholders that have a capacity to influence the socio-economic system participate in the governance structures.

In Belgium, the structure of social dialogue is rooted in the Law of December 5, 1968, which establishes criteria for the representativeness of unions and employers' organizations. For a union to be representative, it must have at least 125,000 members, be part of an inter-

occupational organization, and represent the majority of sectors in both private and public sectors. Based on these criteria, three main unions—FGTB/ABVV, CSC/ACV, and CGSLB/ACLVB—are recognized, each linked to Socialist, Christian, and Liberal movements respectively. Employers are represented by sectoral federations, with the Federation of Belgian Enterprises (FEB/VBO) being the largest, representing 50,000 companies. Other important employer organizations include sector-specific and regional bodies.

However, in recent years, representativity of the social partners and their capacity to influence the socio-economic system is challenged by various trends that increase the distribution of power. On the business side, the variety of industrial sectors and the high proportion (18.5%) of Belgian jobs held by multinationals whose decision-making centres are not in Belgium challenge the representativity of business organizations (Statbel, 2024). On the labour side, employment relationships are affected by a greater distance between capital and labour due to complex corporate structures, as well as by a diversification of employment relationships (platform work, solo-self-employment, atypical and short-term employment) which makes it complicated to aggregate interests (Riordan & Kowalski, 2021).

Additionally, the negative impact of the economy on the environment and the necessity to decarbonize production challenge representativity as the sole source of legitimacy for organising the economy. It has been recognized that economic and social development are not independent from the environment. The general interest cannot be solely composed through the confrontation of economic actors' interests (capital and labour). Environmental protection, as a public good and not an actor-bound interest, should also be integrated in the formation of this general interest.

In Belgium, Climate and environmental issues have led to the increased representation of environmental NGOs in social dialogue for a, as evidenced by the creation of the Federal Council for Sustainable Development in 1997 and increased consultation of environmental organizations in ad-hoc social dialogue fora such as The General Estates for a Just Transition.

Through interviews, different visions prevail about the representativeness of environmental organizations. Most traditional stakeholders point to the fact that environmental organisations represent more than just the interest of the environment taken as an additional factor of production to consider alongside capital and labour. Respective organisations aim to represent the environment as a public good. Interviews also supported the idea that these organizations' legitimacy is built on a different criterion than for traditional social partners. While the

legitimacy of employers and unions is built on a specific idea of their representativity (for instance, based on numbers of workers and companies affiliated), the legitimacy of environmental NGOs is based on their expertise over environmental issues.

There seems to be two parallel movements towards the integration of climate objectives within social dialogue. First, environmental organizations have been integrated within some social and civil dialogue structures (e.g. the Federal Council for Sustainable Development, or the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council in Wallonia) and invited in other ad hoc consultation fora (e.g. Climate roundtables, Just Transition Forum) but this remains limited to less influential bodies. Second, there is some evidence of integration of climate objectives by traditional social partners and within current social dialogue structures. The first approach allows social dialogue to benefit from the expertise of environmental NGOs. But it is also associated with a risk of re-fragmentation between socio-economic and environmental themes in the negotiation structures (between the Central Economic Council and Federal Council for Sustainable Development, between social dialogue and civil dialogue, or within sub-commissions). Moreover, the two most powerful structures in terms of policy influence, the Central Economic Council and National Labour Council, have not extended their representation beyond employers and labour organizations. The second pathway – integration of climate objectives by traditional social partners - conveys a lower risk of fragmentation between socio-economic and ecological themes in the negotiation structure but conveys a risk of conflict of interest and limited expertise on ecological matters as environmental NGOs remain largely excluded from the discussions.

### **3.1.3. Policy instruments**

Social dialogue processes can be used as procedural policy instruments to coordinate decarbonization and socio-economic policies. In addition, the output of social dialogue processes can take the form of substantial policy instruments integrating multiple policy goals. In conservative-corporatist welfare states such as Belgium, social partners play an important role in the management of the social protection (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Balancing the interests of employers and workers, social dialogue therefore contributes to address distributive and social issues in economic decisions through modalities such as incentives and disincentives, subsidies, taxation and bans. Social dialogue also contributes to achieving a strategic degree of planification with its tripartite dialogue on specific transversal policies (industrial policy, etc.). Such policy modalities that are usually negotiated within social dialogue processes could also

serve to integrate environmental and climate issues into economic decisions. This has been the case with the adoption by the National Labour Council of legally binding labour conventions that include both environmental and social objectives on cycling as a means of transport for homework commuting and on eco-cheques with an advantageous fiscal and para-fiscal regime as part of the remuneration package to promote ecological consumption. Beyond these examples, the use of usual social dialogue policy modalities for integrating environmental issues has so far been quite limited in Belgium. There seems to be untapped potential for social dialogue to deepen the integration within certain areas of labour law regulated by collective agreements, laws and regulations. Restructuring collective agreements, laws and regulations could incorporate environmental considerations by promoting sustainable business practices and prioritizing the transition to low-carbon and resilient economic models during corporate restructuring processes. Occupational health and safety increasingly intersect with environmental considerations to reduce environmental risks, thereby protecting workers from health hazards linked to pollution, climate change, and unsafe ecological conditions.

#### **4. Discussion**

Our paper, while based on the case of social dialogue in Belgium, provides relevant insights on the current state of social dialogue and the challenges it faces in light of the transformations of the EU economies, and the required decarbonization. It also shed light on the different pathways towards integrating environmental concerns in socio-economic policy making through social dialogue and the limitations it faces. Finally, it contributes to the literature on policy integration by confirming some theoretical elements and the potential of reflexive governance approaches to enrich theory.

Literature and stakeholders alike reveal a profound comprehension that the traditional social dialogue is challenged by important changes. Stakeholders agree largely that the social dialogue and the economy are confronted with the need to keep the economy within planetary boundaries and that it challenges the role and representativity of social partners and social dialogue institutions.

Representativity of the social partners and their capacity to influence the socio-economic system is challenged by various trends that increase the distribution of power. The increasing share of multinationals in the economy means that many decision centers are outside of

Belgium. On the worker's side, the proliferation of non-standard employment relations challenges the aggregation and representation of their interests.

At the same time, expectations about social dialogue are increasing as the incoming social-ecological transitions require to create and maintain compromises related to the changes to operate, both in the demand (consumption side) and supply (production side). As stated in the Pact for European Social Dialogue in March 2025, "social dialogue provides our labour markets and our economy with the adaptability required to meet the challenges and opportunities facing Europe, such as decarbonization and digitalisation, ensuring both economic competitiveness and social fairness" (European Commission, 2025).

The ambition to decarbonize the economy to make it climate-neutral has been adopted and reiterated in several long-term plans, laws and strategies at European and Belgian level. Beyond the ecological imperative of this transition, ongoing trends such as geopolitical tensions, consumers' expectations, the rise of responsible and impact investment, regulatory developments, and workers' expectations in terms of the meaning of work reinforce the call for decarbonisation. This is the new context in which social dialogue must operate. In this context, the appropriation of environmental and climate issues in parallel to economic and social concerns is a necessity for social concertation to keep its relevance and to keep on influencing policymaking. While this understanding of the policy frame is shared among the various actors of social dialogue in Belgium, it has only led to minor attempts of integration in terms of policy subsystems. To do so, representation could be expanded and mandate given to the social dialogue institutions to guarantee a just transition towards a sustainable and decarbonized economy.

The institutional framework governing social concertation in Belgium provides the opportunity to integrate socio-economic, labour and decarbonisation policies. The integration of environmental concerns within socio-economic policymaking can be achieved through different pathways. However, in our case, this potential is not realized fully due to limited representativity of selected organizations and fragmentation of social dialogue institutions.

Integrating environmental and climate concerns within social dialogue is linked to complex issues about representativity. The principle of representation stands at the core of social dialogue and modern democracies. Selected organizations are considered as representative of the economic actors. As evidenced in the democratic theory literature, representative democracy

fails to offer representation for those who lack a voice, including “the environment” (Buzogány et al., 2025).

Institutional structures and the selection of representative organizations that take part in social dialogue at federal level in Belgium have not evolved deeply in the recent years. Environmental organisations have only been integrated within some less powerful social and civil dialogue structures and invited in other ad hoc consultative fora, limiting the potential for meaningful integration.

Beyond the institutional avenue of policy integration of decarbonisation and socio-economic policies through extended representation for social dialogue, it appears that the intrinsic flexibility of actors and institutions has allowed to some level to adapt to the evolution of policy goals and frame. There is some evidence of integration of climate objectives by traditional social partners and within current social dialogue structures but that comes with a risk of conflict of interest and limited expertise on ecological matters as environmental NGOs remain largely excluded from the discussions.

The effective integration of environmental concerns within social dialogue institutions without formally including environmental organizations might therefore rely on the formation of coalitions. As Mandelli (2025) showed, just transition policies can result from successful policy coalitions of a heterogeneous variety of actors, including labour unions and environmental organizations. Agreement around the policy frame and vague definitions of Just Transition helps connecting various actors without compromising their core interests (Mandelli, 2025). In our case, it seems this integration in the policy frame level has not yet transferred into major institutional and subsystem involvement reforms. There was however some evidence of a coalition forming on just transition between the trade unions and environmental organizations in the form of the “Climate Coalition”.

Beyond stable social dialogue institutions, we also have seen the use of ad hoc consultation fora and processes. The coexistence of stable concertation institutions and ad-hoc consultation processes corresponds to different level of ambition in integration. The positions of councils are traditionally the result of consensus building and of negotiations and provide a relatively robust input to policymakers. However, with ambivalent policy objectives, consensus is sometimes difficult to impossible to reach, and in order for stakeholders to be able to save their faces, the negotiations then lead to adopt a largely “empty” consensus which would reflect the lowest common denominator between social partners. Ad-hoc consultation processes such as

the Climate roundtables and Just Transition forum are free from the necessity to reach consensus in the sense that it still prevails in the Councils. These ad hoc processes allow policy makers to map out stakeholders' visions and positions but with limited potential to inform and influence policymaking with negotiated and coordinated options. This result supports the role of policy forums as important elements of modern governance for providing space for horizontal integration in issues dealing with complexity and uncertainty and spanning across multiple policy subsystems (Fischer & Leifeld, 2015).

This paper attempted to enrich conceptually the procedural approaches to policy integration with "reflexive" governance approaches. For policy integration. Our results support and provide evidence on some of the principles of the procedural approach of policy integration developed by Candel and Biesbroek (2016). It also provides evidence on the potential and limitations of social dialogue to address some governance issues of complex policy problems.

The first and third principles of Candel and Biesbroek's procedural approach to policy integration state that dimensions do not necessarily move in a concerted manner and that there might be interactions and dependencies between them. In our case, it seems that integration in the policy frame has not translated at the same level to the other dimensions. It might be the case that policy frame is the first element that requires integration, and others depend on it but with lock-in effects. This result also echoes the case of the first attempts towards climate policy integration in the EU, where integration of climate objectives in policy commitment, inclusion and institutionalization of these objectives throughout various policy domains had initially had limited effect on the ability to address deep inconsistencies, trade-offs and conflicts (Dupont, 2011).

The second principle is that integration is not a unidirectional process. Integration processes can move positively (more integration) or negatively. Our case shows a slow movement towards integration, but all interviewees pointed towards a risk of disintegration due to 1) change in the political agenda and a new Belgian federal legislature that tends to concentrate solely on socio-economic issues over climate-related policies and 2) collaboration fatigue and difficulty to reach consensus in increasingly conflictual settings about environmental policy.

The fourth principle postulates that policy integration is a process of policy and institutional change led by actors. Similarly to the integration of climate policy within the 2014-2020 EU MFF that resulted from successful policy entrepreneurship (Rietig & Dupont, 2023), in our case, increased integration of policy objectives at the policy frame level resulted from the policy

leadership of the 2020-2024 climate minister. This leadership was made possible through the results of the 2019 elections that provided the green parties with a good representation in the federal government and parliament. In the institutional settings, beyond social dialogue institutions, this leadership has led to the adoption of the federal climate law setting up the governance architecture to manage federal climate action and align with EU obligations: planning, oversight, stakeholder involvement, financial transparency, and federal cohesion.

In terms of complexity management, social dialogue helps tackling the three challenges identified by the reflexive governance literature (Voss et al., 2006): it manages **ambivalence of policy goals** by providing a space for negotiation and mutual understanding among stakeholders with competing interests, enabling the co-creation of balanced and legitimate priorities. It navigates **uncertainty** by incorporating diverse perspectives and knowledge systems, fostering adaptive decision-making and building legitimacy for policies that may evolve over time. Finally, it coordinates **distributed power** by serving as a collaborative platform where actors from different sectors and governance levels can align efforts, build trust, and jointly steer policy implementation—despite the absence of centralized authority.

Our case however echoes concern about the efficacy paradox of reflexive governance and desirability of policy integration. While openness and interaction are necessary to respond adequately to the complex problems of the low-carbon and labour transitions, increased reflexivity comes with an “efficacy paradox” as it risks reducing the action capacity to orient societal development (Voss et al., 2006).

When formulating policy goals, opening up the process to a wide range of actors allows to redefine, revise, prioritize, targets “by taking into account values and facing trade-offs that have to be made” to arrive at a coherent set of goals (Voss et al., 2006, p. 432). While openness, reflexivity and fluidity are necessary to account for the plurality of social actors, values, and visions as well as to ensure policy learning and adaptability over time, the capacity to act also depends on the ability to define at least temporary goals to develop strategies.

In strategy implementation, the issue of resources prevents decision-makers exploiting the whole range of options possible. In multiple dimensions, it seems “opening up in terms of the number and heterogeneity of participant actors decreases the probability of achieving agreement and increases transaction costs” (Voss et al., 2006, p. 430) and can lead to the erosion of strategic capabilities.

Similarly to the efficacy paradox of reflexive governance, producing coordination comes with normative and practical questions of whether, and in what context, policy integration is desirable, when it is feasible, and at what cost (Candel, 2021). Policy integration is usually associated with increased effectiveness in addressing cross-cutting problems compared to siloed approaches, increased efficiency through avoiding duplication and contradictions and increased relevance through a better alignment of interests and prioritization of objectives. Paradoxically, the cons arguments also fall within the same categories of efficiency and effectiveness. Sometimes, policy integration attempts fail to reach beyond symbolic levels despite the amount of resource dedicated. The efforts towards policy integration requires addressing trade-offs and priorities across various sectors and goals which are time and resource-consuming processes. Finally, increased integration might conflict with other values such as decentralization, specific expertise, broader participation, privacy, and citizens' civil liberties. Additionally, some level of diversity and redundancy in government has been associated with increased resilience to change, risks and shocks (Biggs et al., 2015).

## **5. Conclusions**

Results show that there remains real potential for social dialogue to serve the integration of socio-economic, labour and decarbonization policies but with some limitations. Social dialogue has always operated as a way to govern complex policy issues and balance various policy goals. Managing complexity and ambivalence of policy goals is therefore at the heart of social dialogue. Social concertation, as a more flexible and interactive mode of governance, appears to be better placed to contribute to govern transition processes than hierarchical and deterministic processes. The way social partners have come to integrate climate and socio-economic policy goals in their policy briefs and argumentations shows that there is some shared ambition to pursue with the integration of social-ecological policies.

Environmental concerns can be integrated into socio-economic policymaking through various approaches. However, in our context, this integration remains limited, primarily due to the narrow representativeness of the participating organizations and the fragmented structure of the social dialogue institutions. Representativity of the social partners and their capacity to influence the socio-economic system is also challenged by various trends that increase the distribution of power.

Integration of decarbonization objectives within social dialogue institutions remains limited and did not lead to reorient economic development within the national and EU decarbonization targets (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024). The potential for more integration is, however, also delimited by risks. Interviews and recent press releases revealed that social dialogue actors worry about the declining influence of social concertation within economic decisions. The difficulty to reach consensus across a growing range of policy goals increases the risks that policymakers bypass the social concertation and implement more direct modes of governance. This can take the form of government decisions without consultation, technocratic governance or increased direct lobbying with less inclusivity and transparency.

Full integration might also not be a desirable state for governance. It might be associated with limited democratization and reflexivity. As Meadowcroft (2007) puts: “For if governance for sustainable development really takes place in a context where a) goals are unclear and b) knowledge is limited, should we not be glad that c) power is also dispersed?”

On the other side, while social dialogue can serve integration and add reflexivity in the governance processes, it does not offer answers for some of the structural challenges of democracies in handling environmental issues, such as delays emerging from fragmented and complex decision-making processes and the tendency toward incrementalism (Buzogány et al., 2025).

While a diversified representation in social dialogue is needed to match the socio-economic and environmental issues of our time, increased reflexivity and debate do not guarantee an increase in policy integration. Integration and consensus must remain the objective, but once they have been achieved, they can be called into question. The ambition of complete integration is impossible and undesirable, as it is undemocratic, too fragile, not very resilient nor robust. Reflexivity and checks and balances are essential, even if they limit the potential for integration.

Further research should therefore address these potential tensions and synergies between democratic processes, policy integration and efficacy of governance with questions such as: What policy devices to use to address trade-offs between reflexivity, integration, and efficacy? And what forms of democracy and social dialogue to address these challenges?

## 6. Acknowledgement

This paper is part of a research project called LAMARTRA (2021-2025) funded by the Belgian Federal Public Planning Service Science Policy (BELSPO) BRAIN-be 2.0 programme under

grant agreement No B2/202/P3. We would like to thank BELSPO for supporting this research. The paper also benefited from comments and discussions held during a GreenDeal-NET workshop on policy integration held in Brussels in September 2024 and an internal seminar held at ULB in November 2024. We would like to thank the GreenDeal-NET participants of both events for their feedback on earlier versions of this work.

## 7. Declaration of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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## 9. Appendices

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## 10. Tables with captions

**Table 3: Dimensions of policy (dis)integration, adapted from Candel, 2021**

| Dimension                          | Description   | Degrees (Range)   |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>1. Policy Frame &amp; Goals</b> | Focuses on how a crosscutting issue is understood (framed) and how widely and coherently it is addressed in policies. | From narrow, siloed definitions and isolated policy goals to broad, system-wide recognition and coherent, integrated goals. |
| <b>2. Subsystem Involvement</b>    | Refers to the inclusion and coordination of various actor networks and institutional                                  | From isolated efforts by a single subsystem to full involvement and   |

|                              |  |  |
|------------------------------|--|--|
|                              | subsystems in addressing the issue.  | interaction across all relevant subsystems.  |
| <b>3. Policy Instruments</b> | Examines the tools used to address the issue, including their alignment, coordination mechanisms, and overall consistency. | From a few uncoordinated tools with low coherence to a well-aligned, system-wide instrument mix supported by coordination tools. |

**Table 4 : Types of organizations and social dialogue institutions represented in interviews**

| #  | Organization type                                | Member of the social dialogue council:                                 |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | Trade Union                                      | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 2  | Employer's organization                          | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 3  | Researcher                                       | /  |
| 4  | Civil Society organization and Climate Coalition | Federal Council for Sustainable Development                            |
| 5  | Trade Union                                      | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 6  | Government (Climate ministry cabinet)            | /  |
| 7  | Federal Council secretariat                      | Federal Council for Sustainable Development                            |
| 8  | Employer's organization                          | Federal Council for Sustainable Development & Central Economic Council |
| 9  | Regional Council secretariat                     | Walloon Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE)             |
| 10 | Environmental organization                       | Federal Council for Sustainable Development                            |

## **11. Figures**

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## **12. Figure captions list**

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