

Empowering Workers to Accelerate the Ecological Transition: Findings and Challenges from Belgian ‘Best-in- class’ Companies

Policy Brief

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Key messages

- 1** Different fields across the scientific literature increasingly indicate that workers' participation is a key condition to accelerate the ecological transition at firm-level.
- 2** Our case studies conducted within Belgian 'Best-in-class' companies reveal the crucial role played by workers' participation in decision-making inside companies for both developing and solidifying ecological transition pathways.
- 3** Research findings underscore the imperative to strengthen employment policies and social dialogue through empowering workers (i.e., deepening democracy at work).
- 4** Successful socio-ecological transformation necessitates a comprehensive labour strategy transcending the conventional framework defining employment policies and social dialogue, notably through expanding a shared understanding about the nature of the legitimate objects of negotiation.

Introduction

The agenda on "Just Transition" includes a key concern with including workers, and their representatives, in ongoing and future sustainability transformations (Dzebo, Lager, and Klein 2022; Galgóczi 2022; ILO 2015; 2018; 2022a). While traditional policy approaches narrowly focus on employment and green skills development, **a growing EU consensus recognizes the need to strengthen social dialogue and democracy at work to facilitate the ecological transition¹.**

A growing body of research supports this political shift through highlighting the connection between workers' involvement and ecological issues. The "Environmental Labour Studies" accounts for the role of workers as collective actors in the struggle for planetary sustainability (Räthzel, Stevis, and Uzzell 2021). Management studies on "green empowerment" (Markey, McIvor, and Wright 2016) and insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS) reveal positive interactions between workers' involvement and sustainable practices implementation (Moilanen and Alasoini 2023; Süßbauer et al. 2019). Additionally, organizational studies underscore the ecological potential of cooperatives and B-corps based on their emphasis on worker participation (Battilana, Yen, Ferreras, and

Ramarajan 2022; Tabares 2021; Vézina, Malo, and Ben Selma 2017; Winkler, Brown, and Finegold 2019). Moreover, research suggests that aligning the economy with planetary boundaries requires transforming the firm purpose, hence its governance model and ownership structure (Raworth 2017).

Large sample surveys show that 70% of employees say their personal sense of purpose is defined by their work, and when that work feels meaningful, they perform better, are much more committed and are about half as likely to go looking for a new job (De Smet, Dowling, Hancock and Schaninger 2022), while overall, 83% of employees say they are ready and willing to support climate action in the context of their work (Kite Insights 2022). On the qualitative research side, while positive correlations between worker participation and ecological transition at the firm level have been established, the specific mechanisms of this relationship remain relatively unexplored.

The WP5 multiple case study conducted by UCLouvain-CriDIS-TED research team seeks to fill this gap by focusing on how workers are involved with, and contribute to tackling environmental issues at company-level.

1. See the [latest policy commitment at EU level \(March 5, 2025\)](#); and the [joint statement of the EPSCO Council on more democracy at work](#) (November 17, 2023); or, at the global level, the Report by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, [Eradicating poverty beyond growth](#), which highlights democratizing work as one among five key strategies to secure the future.

Methods and results

Hypothesis and critical multi-case study, based on a "best in class" rationale

The scientific literature suggests that **workers' participation is an insufficient yet necessary condition for ecological transition at the firm level**. This participation can accelerate and sustain transformative change within companies by enhancing both efficiency and legitimacy (Ferreras 2019; Ferreras, Battilana, and Méda 2022). Based on this hypothesis, we used a **critical case study approach** (Flyvbjerg 2006; Ragin and Becker 1992; Yin 2014) focused on **"best in class" companies** that illustrate the issues and enable the empirical exploration of this hypothesis. **"Best in class" companies** are defined via **two criteria: 1)** these companies are leaders in their respective industry in Belgium, and their core activity is already concerned with the ecological transition; **2)** the management practices deployed in these firms seem to be departing from traditional top-down decision-making and having moved towards some degree of workers' empowerment (Pérez Sepúlveda, Ferreras, Charles, and Crismer 2023).

The "best in class" companies we studied

Four qualitative, in-depth case studies were conducted on "best-in-class" companies in the LAMARTRA project's four priority

sectors²:

- a) Metallurgy: RECYC, a family-owned Walloon SME company (137 FTE), whose core activity is **recycling secondary raw materials through innovative recycling technologies** from ELV and WEEE.
- b) Agri-food industry: ECOBEANS, a large family-owned Walloon company (340 FTE) engaged in the food transition by producing **plant-based ingredients and promoting regenerative agriculture**.
- c) Construction: ARGILE, a small multi-stakeholder cooperative company (16 FTE) promoting eco-friendly construction materials and expert advice on **eco-construction solutions**, with a presence in Brussels Capital Region and Wallonia.
- d) E-commerce: CYCLO, a small multi-stakeholder cooperative company (14 FTE) **promoting cyclo-logistics as a sustainable solution** for urban goods distribution through delivery, consulting, and training services, and operating in the Brussels and Flemish Region.

Significance of the cases

Representativeness in case studies is not statistical but analytical. To investigate the hypothesis explored through this work package, the case studies focus on the internal dynamics of these companies,

2. The names of the companies have been changed to ensure confidentiality

Methods and results

rather than industry-wide trends. However, the significance of these cases relies on the characteristics of the Belgian socioeconomic context, where large multinational companies are scarce, as more than 99% of companies are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with fewer than 250 workers, which provide 65% of wage employment and contribute to 58,5% of the value added³. Within this universe, micro and small enterprises (with fewer than 50 workers) are dominant (86.4%). This dominance characterizes both the manufacturing (92%) and service (98%) industries⁴. Our cases are also significant from an employment perspective: RECYC and ECOBEANS are medium-sized and large companies, which account, respectively, for 19% and 47% of the employment in their respective industry. ARGILE and CYCLO are among the small companies that account for 30% and 25% of employment in their respective industry. As cooperative firms, ARGILE and CYCLO are also part of the Social Economy, which represents 12% of employers and 15% of employment in French-speaking Belgium (Observatoire de l'Économie Sociale 2025). This socioeconomic embeddedness of our cases contributes to the possibility for generalization across cases.

The analytical framework

All case studies were conducted through

the same analytical framework. The framework is built on the ILO Report about "Greening Enterprises" (ILO 2022a) as we examined the ecological transition at the firm level through focusing on how the **core activities' inputs, processes, and outputs** contribute to a general decarbonization objective. Moreover, workers' participation was approached through the concepts of the political sociology of work, distinguishing its **scope**, the **mechanisms** in place, and the **demos**, i.e., the workers effectively involved (Casterman, Charles, Delhay, Ferreras 2015; Charles and Ferreras 2017).

Cross-case results: a virtuous dynamic

The cross-case analysis highlights a 4-dimensional, self-reinforcing **dynamic**:

1. The companies' contributions to the ecological transition go beyond standard decarbonization practices and encompass the development of **new core activities** and efforts to reduce the environmental impact in all its dimensions. These contributions are the result of **significant innovation trajectories** that have been consolidated over time.

e.g. ECOBEANS, in the agri-food industry, has innovated with plant-based ingredients (chicory and pea fibers and protein) and their food applications since the 1980s, fully

3. See the [European Commission SME Performance Review – Belgium country sheet](#)

4. <https://economie.fgov.be/fr/themes/entreprises/pme-et-independants-en/statistiques-relatives-aux-pme>

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concentrating its activity on them during the 2000s. Recently, they have launched a robust CSR strategy, committing to significant environmental goals, including a 50% reduction in carbon footprint and a 30% decrease in industrial water consumption by 2030.

2. From a general perspective, **workers play an essential - albeit not consistently nor officially recognized - role** in these contributions through their involvement and participation in the decisions made within the company at different levels.

e.g. At ARGILE (construction), employee input has directly enhanced logistics, storage, and sales strategies for eco-materials. The employee-inclusive 'management committee' facilitates this process through translating shop-floor insights into effective operational solutions.

3. More precisely, **increasing workers' participation in topics related to the firm's business activity** (which are traditionally out of workers' scope, and out of the classical domain of discussion covered by social dialogue) **appears to play a crucial role in consolidating innovative strategies**, as they are adopted by "best-in-class" firms, and, therefore, further accelerating the ecological transition.

e.g. CYCLO's successful eco-cyclo-logistics model is driven by robust worker participation. This includes worker representation at the board of directors, and regular manager-worker workshops for

performance evaluation and work process improvement of this labour-intensive activity.

4. The **positive dynamics driving workers' participation toward the ecological transition**, at the different relevant company levels, operate within conditions enabled by **three main conditions**: the nature of **capital investment** (long-term and diversified), the quality of **labour investment** (meaningful individual and collective involvement), and the adequacy of **public policies and State financial involvement** (adequate regulations, and State investment).

e.g. RECYC's technological innovations were driven by private investments in long-term infrastructure and R&D, substantial regional and European R&D funding, and key facilitating public regulations (like the 1996 Walloon decree putting an end to shredder-residue landfilling). Yet, these innovations were only made possible and further solidified through the collective commitment of high quality labour investment (i.e. highly specialized workers through internal training).

Conclusions

Successfully navigating the ecological transition –i.e., with adequate speed and quality –requires a deeper understanding of what it means at the worker level. Traditional views about employment policies and social dialogue are too limited to fully embrace this new reality in all its potential. Based on case studies of “best-in-class” Belgian companies, our research results support the hypothesis of a deep correlation between worker participation in decision-making and the effective, innovative, and timely implementation of transition strategies⁵. The structural similarity between these companies and the Belgian productive context allows for the generalization of this significant cross-case result⁶. In other words, there is no structural obstacle for companies to becoming leaders in accelerating the ecological transition through tapping into the potential for leadership that comes from their labour investment, and which happens through workers’ involvement in decision-making (i.e., democracy at work).

Yet, our findings also highlight critical gaps, notably the need for a consistent integration of worker participation across all company levels, from the shop floor to strategic decisions typically made at board level. This situation necessitates strengthening workers’ channels of participation within the company, and union strategies could successfully support this move by fostering workers’ capabilities in order to shape the direction of the ecological transition meaningfully. While State support for long-term capital investment is crucial, it must qualitatively adapt through moving beyond the traditional conception (i.e. “fordist”) of employment policies, via support to labour investors’ critical involvement in the direction of the economic development (i.e. foster strategies of deepening “democracy at work”), particularly at the firm level, through strengthening the effectiveness and scope of institutions of social dialogue (e.g. in particular through expanding topics discussed at the level of works councils).

5. For example, ECOBEANS’ commitment to CSR is yielding tangible results: they’ve earned B Corp certification and lowered Scope 1 and 2 CO₂ emissions from 49 to 43 T CO₂-eq between 2019 and 2023, according to their latest sustainability report. Furthermore, a CYCLO life-cycle assessment demonstrates that cargo-bike delivery reduces CO₂ emissions by 96-98% compared to conventional diesel and electric vans.

6. While in some sectors with prominent institutionalized worker participation, such as the German automotive sector, the ecological transition does not seem to be directly facilitated by the co-determination model, comparative scientific research suggests that the issue is not the participation model per se, but several factors both internal and external to companies that influence union strategies on sustainable matters (Kalt 2022; Andretta and Imperatore 2024).

Key question: Why does democracy at work benefit companies?

In the context of knowledge-based economies, labour investors are better trained and informed than ever in history. As they stand closer to the work process, workers are usually better equipped than capital investors and managers to identify possible innovation margins and environmental risks that need to be addressed. Thus, bringing in the decision-making process workers' expertise and insights leads to fairer, more reasonable, and more intelligent decisions (Ferreras 2017; Ferreras, Battilana and Méda 2022), which is fundamental for navigating the current ecological challenges. Unlike the mandate to participate imposed by some of the "new managerial imaginaries" i.e. '*entreprises libérées*,' etc. (Jégou 2023), which often translates into increased individual responsabilization and labour suffering (Dejours, Deranty, Renault and Smith 2018), practices accounting for deepening democracy at work imply a clear delegation of power and accountability within a clear, collectively-identified structure, at various, relevant levels of decision-making (Charles and Ferreras 2017).

The ideal of workplace democracy traditionally refers to workers' cooperatives, but the scientific literature suggests that various business models can promote greater democracy at work (Battilana, Yen, Ferreras, and Ramarajan, 2022). In fact, none of our cases are worker cooperatives. Yet, our research reveals a range of workers' participation mechanisms in firms within both traditional (capitalist) and multi-stakeholder cooperative corporate structures, highlighting the various ways in which this participation has been fundamental to the ecological transition. These "best participation practices" could be seen as a "**green capability toolbox**" to foster workers' voice in sustainable solutions and pathways

Key question: Why does democracy at work benefit companies?

Example of participation practices across companies that should be seen as part of the green capability toolbox of any company.

RECYC's **flat organizational structure** facilitates direct blue- and white-collar workers' involvement in technical decision-making within treatment units, which has been critical to consolidating innovative industrial recycling lines for expanding the range of secondary raw materials recovered.

ECOBEANS utilizes **cross-functional project teams, or "cells,"** which include managers and employees, to address complex, cross-cutting challenges. For example, the "Sequoia" cell outlines the foundations for the current CSR strategy, including several ecological commitments, and the "Footprint" cell aims to enhance decarbonization at one of the plants.

At ARGILE, **employees integrate the 'management committee,'** which reports directly to the cooperative board, fostering employee voice. This participation acknowledges the crucial role of workers in promoting eco-construction, whether through expert advice from sales staff or enhancements in the storage of eco-materials and waste management from warehouse employees.

CYCLO's approach is multifaceted, incorporating **worker-inclusive workshops, the election of 'squad leaders'** from within the workforce, and a **worker's representative on the board.** This strong commitment to shared governance sustains cooperative improvements on cyclo-logistics and greening workplace practices.

Policy recommendations

Support a research agenda focused on understanding workers' critical role in the ecological transition

The ecological crisis and its necessary transformations require the economy's adaptation, affecting the employment structure, particularly in sectors highly dependent on fossil fuels. This leads to the premise of "leave no one behind," as the global Just Transition framework underscores. However, the scientific literature points out that the concerns of workers are not limited to secure jobs in this context. Workers are not only recipients of policies (such as employment and vocational training) but are also key actors in sustainable transitions (Andretta and Imperatore, 2024; Moilanen and Alasoini 2023).

1

Our research demonstrates the essential role of workers' participation in decision-making, from the shop floor to strategic decisions, in consolidating innovative transition pathways. Workers and their unions are key allies leading toward the ecological transition. Furthermore, when they are not, the appeal of populist demagogues and the extreme right seem to become the only credible alternative (Coutrot 2024). It is, therefore, necessary to broaden the understanding of workers' capabilities and their role to accelerate socio-ecological transformations through scientific research. **There is a need for an observatory focused on workers' role in the ecological transition**, which would produce, systemize, and disseminate scientific insights to inform science-based policymaking, and the stakeholders' positions. **This new observatory could play a key role in the dissemination of a science-based toolbox for deepening democracy at work in the service of sustainable innovation.**

Policy recommendations

Expanding the legitimate domain concerned with the institutions of social dialogue, beyond a traditional understanding of the dimensions of work (wages, working hours, etc.) toward a richer view at the dimensions of the labour investment (quality of the product or service produced, environmental dimensions of the production, etc.)

2

While pro-employment policies tend to adopt an individualizing and economicist view of labour (i.e. as in equipping workers with functional, so-called “green skills” to transition from “brown jobs” to “green jobs”), **expanding the domain of topics concerned with social dialogue is fundamental to moving toward a post-carbon economy under conditions of justice**. Under the current framework, there is evidence of the limited capacity of collective bargaining to integrate sustainability issues (ILO 2022b). Yet, given the actual role that workers play in innovation developments, documented through our research and leading to new activities or potentially counteracting the environmental impacts of production and service, **it is critical to deepen practices of “democracy at work” to accelerate the socio-ecological transition**. Sharing power with workers, including them in decision-making, is key to build intelligent and resilient organizations (Charles, Ferreras and Lamine 2020), and to successfully and at speed transition towards a post-carbon economy. Furthermore, from a larger societal perspective, it is key to keep in mind that **the practice of democracy in the workplace generates the enabling conditions for a democratic society to flourish** (Honneth 2024; Coutrot 2024; Jirjahn and Le 2024), which is a pre-condition to successfully navigate the multiple contemporary crises (Pérez Sepúlveda 2025), the most urgent of which being the ecological crisis.

Policy recommendations

3

The role of the State

The role of the State is fundamental in shaping economic outcomes (Mazzucato 2015), i.e. in creating conditions that allow for the orientation of private investments. It is critical indeed if society wants to mind for a specific outcome, e.g., fitting the economy within the limits of planetary boundaries (Raworth 2017). To this end, the State uses various instruments: in particular, corporate, commercial, and labour regulation, direct participation in economic activity, and tax structure. These instruments must be mobilized to ecologically reorient companies' activities in order to make their operations compatible with the planetary boundaries. **Our research shows that regulation and direct public investment have been essential in the development of new activities that contribute to the ecological transition. Promoting democracy at work is within the scope of State's action. Advancing more democracy at work can become a more demanding internal condition for companies** (i.e. expanding the scope of topics discussed through collective bargaining, including workers' voice in decision-making) as firms' behavior could be incentivized through the mobilization of public instruments like direct public investment or public procurements (Ferreras 2019). In a complementary way, democracy at work should integrate vocational training plans since workers' involvement implies specific enabling conditions, such as feeling legitimate to speaking up (Talpin 2011). **Promoting democracy at work should go hand in hand with generating the necessary skills to intervene in the contemporary workplace.**

Policy recommendations

The role of labour unions

4

The role of unions in promoting democracy at work is historic. Unions have been historically the only actor capable to organize workers' voice. **Our results highlight a critical challenge in the consistent integration of workers' participation within companies that speaks directly to union's role.** The institutionalized forms of social dialogue at the firm level do not often reflect nor track workers' actual channels for participation (mainly at the intermediate and shop floor levels), which are key to develop sustainability transitions (Askenazy and Didry 2023). It appears that local unions are ill-equipped to identify and support the environmental contribution of workers to the companies' work process and production. In which case, the two dynamics evolve separately. Yet, we showed that workers' contribution is (increasingly) significant in the growth of the company's environmental contribution. **Unions, therefore, have the responsibility to equip their members at all levels of representation and negotiation** to reflect on, and articulate with workers' actual practices of participation, and influence the strategic direction of firms' activities, and beyond, nurturing a larger view, across firms, and in doing so, **accelerate the ecological transition at the economy-wide level.**

Policy recommendations

The role of firms and business unions

5

As central institutions of the economy, companies have a societal responsibility to lead and accelerate the ecological transition. The magnitude of the challenge that these transformations entail requires going beyond decarbonization strategies framed in business-as-usual logic. These have proven to be insufficient indeed. **Making the economy compatible with the 9 planetary boundaries in a safe timeframe requires not only technical but also social and political innovations.** Along with a growing scientific literature, our research indicates **that democratizing corporate decision-making is a critical social innovation for achieving the necessary leap toward sustainability.** Companies should consider harnessing the benefits of more democracy at work to navigate the ecological challenges by promoting mechanisms for workers' participation, and equally promoting such mechanisms throughout the value chains in which they are involved.

Companies are not alone in this effort. Business associations have an essential role to play here, which goes beyond the defense of corporate interests. The ecological transition to keep the economy within the 9 planetary boundaries is a collective effort and, **business associations must lead by promoting experimentation with deepening democracy at work among their members** in order to support their employees' motivation, retain talents in the service of innovation (Draghi 2024), and thus accelerate and consolidate sustainable solutions over time, as the scientific literature (Battilana, Yen, Ferreras, and Ramarajan, 2022) and our research indicate. **Expanding workers' participation in decisions is an ethical issue and a strategic condition for building prosperous and innovative firms.**

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Project

This policy brief is part of a research project called LAMARTRA (2021-2025). The project aimed to explore the potential futures that could emerge from the low-carbon and labour transitions. It also sought to understand how these transitions can be governed to achieve both climate objectives and just work and employment opportunities.

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Multi-case study of 4 Belgian companies, based on "best-in-class" rationale



2 CRITERIA FOR SELECTING "BEST-IN-CLASS" COMPANIES:

1. COMPANIES ARE LEADERS IN RESPECTIVE FIELD & THEIR CORE ACTIVITY IS CONCERNED WITH THE ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

2. MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN PLACE TAP INTO WORKERS' INVESTMENT, DEPARTING FROM CLASSIC, TOP-DOWN AUTHORITY

BEST in CLASS COMPANIES SHOW that INNOVATION in ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION is CO-PRODUCED with WORKERS
↳ in CORE-BUSINESS DECISIONS



- 83% OF WORKERS ARE READY TO SUPPORT CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH THEIR JOB
- 70% OF EMPLOYEES SAY THEIR PERSONAL SENSE OF PURPOSE is DEFINED BY THEIR WORK

WORKERS PARTICIPATION is ESSENTIAL TO ACCELERATE ECOLOGICAL TRANSITIONS AT FIRM LEVEL

RECYC CIRCULAR ECONOMY

MEDIUM-SIZE CORPORATION

- TECHNICAL WORKERS HELP OPTIMIZE INDUSTRIAL RECYCLING



ARGILE ECO-CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS & SOLUTIONS

SMALL COOPERATIVE

- WORKERS' VOICE ENHANCES LOGISTICS, STORAGE & SALES
- WORKERS SIT IN THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE



ECOBANS FOOD SUSTAINABLE TRANSITION

LARGE CORPORATION

- WORKER AUTONOMY in PLANTS and R&D LABS
- FUNCTIONAL "CELLS" SHAPED CSR & DECARBONIZATION GOALS (EX: -50% CARBON FOOTPRINT)



CYCLO CYCLO-LOGISTICS

SMALL COOPERATIVE

- PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE INCLUDES BOARD-LEVEL REPRESENTATION, WORKER-LED WORKSHOPS, & AUTONOMY IN DELIVERY TASKS



ENABLING CONDITIONS



the ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION REQUIRES REDEFINING EMPLOYMENT POLICIES TO EMPOWER WORKERS

UNIONS SHOULD CONNECT WITH ACTUAL PARTICIPATION PRACTICES

LAMARTRA

Bridging decarbonization and labour market in sustainability transitions

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- SUPPORT RESEARCH ON WORKERS' ROLE IN TRANSITION AND DISSEMINATE SCIENCE-BASED TOOLBOX
- EXPAND DOMAIN of SOCIAL DIALOGUE, INCLUDE NEW TOPICS (PRODUCT QUALITY, ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE,...)
- KEY ROLE OF the STATE (INVESTMENT, REGULATION, PROCUREMENT,...)
- KEY ROLE OF UNIONS IN RECOGNIZING AND FOSTERING WORKERS' ECOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS
- KEY ROLE OF FIRMS & LEADERSHIP OF EMPLOYERS' ASSOCIATIONS in FOSTERING DEMOCRACY AT WORK