

A European Green Caring Society

Overcoming Fragmentation

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This policy brief examines the interconnections between care for the climate, biodiversity and the environment on the one hand and care for humans on the other. We argue that the related systems are currently in a twin crisis and advocate for integrated political solutions. As Europe transitions from a legislative term dominated by a pandemic and an escalating ecological emergency, which required significant green and human care policy initiatives, the new mandate presents an opportunity to unify these agendas and strengthen both systems. Adopting a green caring society approach can foster collaboration among decisionmakers committed to a sustainable, resilient, and positive European future. This approach can bring the EU closer to its citizens and enhance overall well-being while respecting the planet's boundaries.

Introduction

The multi-pronged degradation of the natural world – the climate emergency, biodiversity loss and extensive air, water and soil pollution – is too often mistakenly viewed as unrelated to the social sphere. However, the ecological crisis is already having a severe impact on citizens' health¹, with accelerating biodiversity destruction, pollution and climate change leading to more natural disasters, heatwaves, poorer air quality, increased risk of zoonoses, and eco-anxiety – worsening Europe's disease burden² and overall citizens' wellbeing.

Under these conditions it will be extremely challenging to maintain – or improve – people's ability to be cared for and to care for others. If policymakers don't respond to these new risks, essential rights, from the right to health to the right to a healthy environment, could be jeopardised; along with the EU's founding values as set out in the Treaty.

At the same time, our European care infrastructure has a significant ecological impact as well. It is thus equally crucial to adapt care systems to respond to climate, environmental and biodiversity challenges, so that they become a beacon of mitigation and resilience in light of the ecological crisis – instead of making matters worse.

¹ One in eight deaths in Europe (the equivalent of the total population of Frankfurt) can be linked to pollution (EEA, 2020). In a survey covering 10 countries including France, Finland, Portugal and the UK, nearly 62% of young people said they were anxious about climate change. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)

² Almost 9% of all cancer deaths in Europe in 2019 were estimated to be due to environmental and occupational factors (IHME, 2020).

Green and care policy are two sides of the same coin and should therefore be developed in ways that drive them to be mutually reinforcing. They can be merged through the adoption of a Green Caring Society approach.

Care is “a deep empathy for humans, non-humans and nature encompassing a wide range of activities that contribute to human well-being and quality of life, from improving one’s own living conditions through the well-being of a particular group or its members, to caring for the local, regional, national or international community as well as for the well-being of non-humans and the natural world.”

“Care is a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”

(Lorek, S., Power, K., and Parker, N. (2023); Fisher, B. & Tronto J.C., 1990)

State of play

A twin crisis

Not everyone will be affected in the same way by the ecological crisis, with especially people who already need long-term care (e.g. the chronically ill, the elderly, those with disabilities) being also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and the ecological emergency. For example, extreme weather events such as heatwaves are particularly harmful to the physical and mental health of older people. In the US, people over the age of 60 accounted for 80% of the estimated 12,000 heat-related deaths in 2021, and there was a similar pattern in Europe during last summers' extreme heat waves (Dutchen, 2021). Socio-economic factors also come into play, as low-income households and neighbourhoods are more exposed to pollution and usually have more limited access to green spaces (EEA, 2022). The ecological crisis is thus expected to act as a multiplier of both existing care needs and inequality.

The effects of this human-caused ecological crisis on our care systems are occurring in a context in which care provision (childcare, education, healthcare, care for older people or the disabled) is already under pressure. Long term care needs are massively on the rise in Europe, heavily influenced by demographic changes, and chronic underinvestment has, meanwhile, left a significant proportion of care activities dependent on underpaid labour. In 2018, the hourly rate for workers providing social care was 21% below the national average (FEPS, 2023). On top of this, especially that segment of care that is provided within families (for infants, the sick or the elderly, for example), is often unpaid, and unevenly distributed, with 59% of informal carers in European households being women (FEPS, 2023) – an imbalance that is projected to get even worse³.

The strain on our care systems is also apparent in the serious shortages of care workers. And again here, projections of the future numbers are not implying an improvement, but rather the opposite. The amount of people in Europe with long-term needs is projected to rise to 33 million by 2050, from their current number of 24 million; at the same time, there is expected to be an increased shortfall of 4.1 million healthcare workers by 2030 (FEPS, 2023; JRC, 2022; European Parliament, 2022; OECD, 2020). European societies are neglecting care in many other ways too, for example by continuing to tolerate harmful behaviours such as violence against women, bullying and racism. And loneliness, which is highly detrimental to well-being, is also on the rise, with approximately 10% of Europeans reporting that they feel excluded

³ In 1990 in Europe there were 2.7 women aged 50-64 for every person aged 80+; by 2016 this number had dropped to 1.9. This is just one of the signs that European society is ill-prepared for the ageing of its population.

from society (Eurofound, 2018).

This ongoing crisis in the care sector will in its turn make it harder for it to contribute to the green transition. The care sector is a major contributor to greenhouse gases and pollution⁴, and also has other harmful environmental impacts (National Institute for Public Health Environment, 2022). Schools, nurseries, crèches, public hospitals and retirement homes – which are already underfunded – face major challenges to invest in their decarbonisation. It is highly unlikely that they will have the capacity to reduce their environmental footprint and adapt to - much less mitigate - the ecological crisis without strengthened support and funding. Moreover, for as long as there is no integration between care systems and the green transition, the huge and increasing investment required for climate mitigation and adaptation could in worst cases even compete with investment in other care systems⁵.

The EU's policy framework on the green-care nexus

The EU's green - care policy framework currently has two, mostly non-overlapping, components: one that focuses on human care (care policy) and one that focuses on care for the environment and the commons (green policy).

The **green policy strand**, which started with policies to deal with acid rain and waste control in the early 1970s, underwent a remarkable acceleration in 2019 with the launch of the European Green Deal. The European Green Deal includes a set of unprecedented policy objectives to fight the ecological crisis that we are facing. It seeks to encourage more caring behaviours towards nature (water, soil, air, ecosystems and animals) by empowering consumers in the green transition and by funding initiatives to deliver climate action. It also aims to disincentivise harmful practices, by means of the “polluter pays” principle, for example.

One particularly interesting aspect of the Green Deal from a caring perspective is its Green Oath, which aims to incorporate a known principle of medical ethics - *Do no harm* -, to the environment in this case, into all policies developed by the European Commission. There is also the Farm to Fork Strategy, which aims to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly and therefore deserves a mention as an example of best practice in terms of green policy that also overlaps with care policy. The Zero Pollution Action Plan, moreover, which aims to reduce the number of premature deaths due to exposure to fine particulate matter by 55% by 2030, as compared to 2005⁶ also shows how green and care policy can go hand in hand.

However, these positive examples have not been translated into a fully-fledged sustainable care strategy. While the concept of the Just Transition could encompass many aspects of a green caring society, it is currently very much focused on employment in specific industrial sectors and does not provide a “whole care” approach to the green transition. And while the Social Climate Fund was designed to address negative distributional effects, it is – similarly to the Just Transition Fund - too limited in scale to have a major impact (Moesker & Pesch, 2022). Another key green policy file, the 2020 Adaptation Strategy, acknowledges the uneven degrees of vulnerability to climate change within the population. But, according to the EEA (2022), implementation of equitable adaptation solutions by member states is still rare.

Moreover, despite treaty obligations to foreground gender in all policies, the Green Deal is largely gender-blind (EEB, 2022). This is problematic from a care perspective, as it is highly likely that women, especially those in single households with young children, will be disproportionately affected by the twin crisis. On

⁴ While there are no figures available for the European level, it is estimated that, for a European country such as the Netherlands, the healthcare system is responsible for around 7% of all greenhouse gas emissions, while chemical products – which include solvents and medicines – account for around 40%. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30121-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30121-2/fulltext)

⁵ According to Eurostat, climate-related extreme events have cost the EU more than 145 billion euros over the last decade, while it stands to lose 11% of its GDP by 2050 under a BAU scenario. World Economic Forum. (2022, December). Climate change has cost the EU €145 billion in a decade. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/12/climate-europe-gdp-emissions/>

⁶ It is worth noting that the timelines for implementing the Zero Pollution Action Plan are longer in poorer Member States.

average, women in Europe are at greater risk of poverty than men (22.6% compared to 20.7% in 2023)⁷. They are also twice as likely as men to spend at least 5 hours per day on childcare (EIGE, 2023). As a result, their capacity to invest time and money in renewable energy or insulation, or to buy more sustainable products and services, is lower (European Parliament, 2022). The situation of migrant women and women of colour is worse still on both counts.

For as long as Green Deal policies are not also assessed in terms of their social impact as a matter of course, it is reasonable to assume that final social outcomes will very much depend on the ways in which environmental policies and their associated measures are designed and implemented in practice. This is a huge risk, not only from a social, but also from a political and an ecological perspective. In political terms, because it creates backlash against decisionmakers that put forward ambitious climate and environmental action; in ecological terms because the same backlash finally risks delaying political action.

The **human care strand** (care policy framework) is a much more recent phenomenon at the European level, as most of these policy areas fall under the reserved competencies of the Member States. The European Union has however extended its areas of intervention as a result of the COVID crisis. The pandemic indeed clearly demonstrated the importance of social capital and cohesion as well as human care, with initial policy responses attempting to strengthen the sector (Fraser et al., 2022)⁸.

Especially in the field of healthcare concrete steps were taken: the European Health Union, set up in 2020, aims to ensure that the EU and its Member States are better placed to prevent and deal with future pandemics, thereby improving the resilience of Europe's health systems. Both this initiative and the EU4Health programme take a "One Health" approach to pandemics and provide for the surveillance of zoonoses and control of insect-borne diseases and antimicrobial resistance, all of which are closely linked with environmental policies such as biodiversity, transformation of the livestock industry and adaptation to climate change.

Next to the COVID-pandemic, the EU's ageing population and related growing spike in long-term care needs have been increasingly reflected in EU policy debates and initiatives. The European Care strategy, adopted in 2022, is an important development that results out of this context. It marked the first time that care-centred language was used at the highest European decision-making platforms and is therefore a crucial precedent for a systemic care agenda.

The EU's Care Strategy in the words of Ursula von der Leyen

"We will come forward with a new European Care Strategy to support men and women in finding the best care and the best life balance for them." (SOTEU, 2021)

"We should take better care of each other. And for many who feel anxious and lost, appropriate, accessible and affordable support can make all the difference." (SOTEU, 2023)

This strategy has been designed to benefit people of all ages who are in need of support, by improving their access to affordable, high-quality care. It is in that sense an important attempt to address the growing societal challenges linked to care and care needs. It also supports care workers by improving the quality of work in the care sector, while addressing the serious gender inequality arising from the unfair distribution of unpaid care work. However, it entirely disregards the environmental aspects of care and – unlike the EU's 2023 mental health strategy, which cites the climate crisis as a factor in the growing prevalence of mental

⁷ See Eurostat (2023). Sustainable development in the European Union. Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/15234730/16817772/KS-04-23-184-EN-N.pdf/845a1782-998d-a767-b097-f22ebe93d422?version=2.0&t=1688373085450>

⁸ However, what seemed an obvious priority at that time has since increasingly given way to supposedly more pressing political priorities, resulting in less care-related attention, policy-making and investment.

health conditions in Europe – remains silent on the green-care nexus.

With these two strands left largely disconnected, democratic actors in the EU are ignoring an important lever to deliver a positive, resilient and future-proof offer to citizens. Unifying the two agendas would strengthen both systems and increase wellbeing, while mitigating the ecological crisis. Adopting a green caring society approach is therefore no less than a window of opportunity for green voices and other democratic actors that are committed to a sustainable, resilient, and positive European future. This approach can bring the EU closer to its citizens and simultaneously revamp public support for ambitious green policy.

Reflections on the state of play

Notwithstanding the examples of best practice mentioned above – such as the 2020 Adaptation Strategy, Farm to Fork and the Zero Pollution Action Plan – the care policy and green policy frameworks need to be more integrated. The Green Oath of Do No Harm contained in the European Green Deal must also treat the advancement of care as one of its key aims; equally, programmes such as the European Care Strategy need to be more closely linked with the key European climate and environmental commitments. This includes ensuring that green policy enhances the social fabric – i.e. the strength and quality of relationships between individuals, whether within families, at work or in wider society – and that the care sector is also contributing to the EU’s green transition.

Connecting the dots between the green policy strand and the human care policy strand is crucial for social, environmental, as well as economic and geopolitical resilience of the Union.

Tackling common roots

As discussed above, the crises in ecology and care are intertwined. They also share the same root: both are caused by a socio-economic system that views caring for people and the environment as a burden whose costs must be reduced in the name of productivity and competitiveness, rather than as an essential investment in citizens’ wellbeing and consequently the future prosperity of the continent.

In this system, the majority of care work is taken for granted or rendered invisible. Societal norms that only value certain forms of work (see Figure 1, below) result in the disregarding of people doing (often unpaid and uncontracted) care work; these people are mostly women, particularly women of colour and migrants.

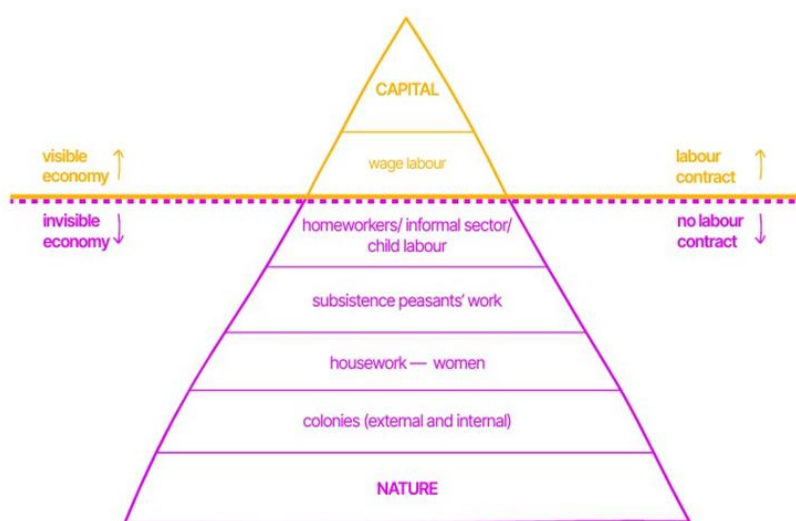


Figure 1 Care to see: The essential contributions to life below the surface of markets. Source: Hot or Cool, 2023.

This system is based on an ideology that ignores the wealth of scientific evidence showing that caring for others and for nature is an intrinsic human need and is highly beneficial for health, happiness and longevity. It is also characterised by short-termism and an unwillingness to invest in the foundations for long-term prosperity, such as health, skills, social relationships and nature. Care, by contrast, is based on concern for intergenerational equity. Most care is provided inter-generationally (parents-children, children-grandparents, etc.) and creates both short and long-term societal benefits. Likewise, the reason for addressing the climate emergency, biodiversity loss and pollution is to make it possible for future generations to flourish.

Another problem with the current system is that it rewards uncaring behaviours that create personal gain at the expense of others and the planet; by contrast, the costs of caring behaviours are often borne by individuals and families, despite their benefits to society.

Extraction and the exploitation of people, animals and ecosystems are systemically encouraged in the name of progress, productivity and competitiveness. For instance, the remuneration of farmers for protecting and nurturing healthy ecosystems is still controversial and largely non-existent, while overfishing and the use of fossil fuels are often supported by direct or indirect subsidies.

A big part of these problems is founded on one-dimensional governance frameworks. The insistence on using GDP and economic growth as the sole measures of prosperity means that (unpaid) care for people and ecosystems is simply left out of the picture.

Any solution to these two, intertwined crises will require the root cause to be addressed, and the adoption of a new way of looking at our society and economy. The most promising and best-defined pathway to date is based on sustainable wellbeing.

Towards a wellbeing agenda

Progressing to a sustainable, inclusive society will require a new paradigm: one in which the focus is on people's needs and wellbeing in addition to – or even instead of – economic productivity. In this context, the wellbeing agenda has emerged as a credible alternative to the GDP-dominated frameworks; with wellbeing understood to mean the fulfilment of basic physiological and safety needs, self-actualisation, esteem, belonging and love (see Figure 2, below).

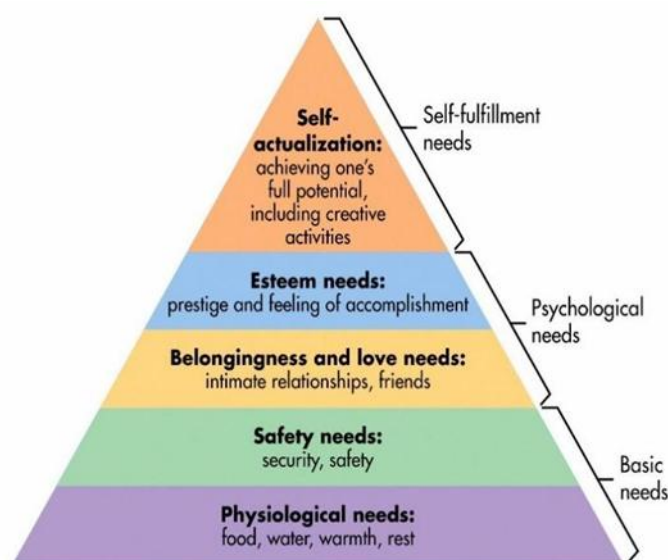


Figure 2 Enhanced Maslow hierarchy of needs

This alternative form of system-thinking has not yet been widely implemented, but momentum has been growing in recent years. A modest step forward was taken under the Finnish presidency in 2019, when the

Council of the EU adopted the concept of the Economy of Wellbeing⁹. There are also promising signs within other EU policymaking initiatives: the Sustainable and Inclusive Wellbeing framework currently being developed by the Joint Research Centre, for example¹⁰. The Commission is set to introduce cross-cutting accounting for resources for future wellbeing.

This commendable approach reflects the need to care for future generations by protecting their resources (i.e. intergenerational equity) – something that is central to the development of a green caring society. Finally, many civil society organisations and international bodies have been working on this agenda with increasing rigour and potential for implementation.

However, some conceptualisations of the wellbeing economy have failed to sufficiently highlight certain important “green caring” considerations. Within this framework, it is important to not disregard the actions that are conducive to meeting people’s needs and promoting their wellbeing, and on acknowledging the value of both paid and unpaid work carried out by carers involved in the delivery of the wellbeing economy. In terms of the environment, wellbeing approaches need to put enough emphasis on sustainability and planetary boundaries. The EU’s 8th Environment Action Plan is a good example of such an environmentally sound translation of the wellbeing agenda¹¹.

Political proposals

The new European Commission and European Parliament should build on the lessons of the COVID crisis and the achievements of the European Green Deal, Health Union and Care Strategy, and work towards a green caring society in which Europeans can live well, within the limits of the planet.

Enabling sustainable wellbeing in the EU within planetary boundaries

The goal of the 8th Environment Action Plan is that Europeans will be able to “live well, within the limits of the planet”, by 2050 at the latest. The following proposals can help turn words into action:

- **Extend the Do No Harm principle.** The Do No Harm principle should apply to care for both humans and the environment. Ultimately, it should also go beyond the mere avoidance of harm and actively deliver positive impacts. It would incentivise the emergence of double benefit policies that would have a positive impact on both environmental and social cohesion. In line with the principles of the Aarhus Convention¹², citizens moreover should be enabled to become more involved in the implementation of the Do No Harm principle through the ability to challenge inadequate enforcement of legislation or regulations when this leads to “uncaring” outcomes on the ground.
- **Support the emergence of a green care sector.** A greener care sector would offer meaningful, low-carbon employment and should be supported with green public procurement and socio-ecological investment. Actors in the care and social sectors should be supported to become greener. In

⁹ See Council of the European Union (2019). Economy of Wellbeing: the Council adopts conclusions. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/24/economy-of-wellbeing-the-council-adopts-conclusions/>

¹⁰ See European Commission (2023). JRC portfolio 20: Inclusive and resilient society. https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-science-and-knowledge-activities/inclusive-and-resilient-society_en

¹¹ The 8th Environment Action Programme (EAP) was adopted to guide European environmental policy until the end of the decade. See here: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/environment-action-programme-2030_en

¹² The Aarhus Convention was founded on the principles of participative democracy, and includes several rights for individuals and civil society organisations with regard to the environment. These include transparency, consultation and the right to remedy.

another GEF policy brief¹³, for example, EU institutional support for a systematic decarbonisation of the health sector was put forward as a key opportunity. Green, care-friendly innovation in services, supply chains, technologies and governance should be supported by means of dedicated funding from Horizon Europe programmes, as well as by European Structural Funds.

- **Ecological and progressive tax reform.** There is clear evidence that countries with greener and more progressive tax regimes do better in terms of wellbeing and prosperity than other countries (Gore et al., 2022). It is important to note that best practice (as in Sweden, for example) shows that there is greater societal acceptance of wider tax reforms when they tackle both inequality and pollution. Given the scale of the challenges ahead, there should be a tax on wealth, including on intergenerational wealth transmission. The European level has a role to play from the perspective of the Single Market as well as in response to the unprecedented and in essence cross-border ecological challenges its member states commonly face.
- **People's Sovereignty Fund.** Individuals, families and communities, irrespective of location, age or socio-economic status, should be able to count on accessible, universal basic services to make them resilient to changing socio-economic conditions while simultaneously helping them mitigate the climate crisis¹⁴. With the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) ending, and a new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) taking off in 2027, an important window of opportunity arises to make new European funding and financial frameworks truly fit to deliver wellbeing and resilience. A European fund that ensures universal access to resilient, green basic services would do just that, and can be a driver for a European green caring society. In addition, every European citizen could be given the right to vote on the Fund's priorities, with those below the age of 30 given a greater voice in order to ensure that young people and future generations are better represented.
- **Mobilise private finance for green and caring products and services.** EU institutions and national governments alike should help mobilise greater private sector investment in a green caring society by creating (tax) incentives for households and businesses to invest in products and services that are both sustainable and caring. The European Commission must also incentivise demand for "caring" financial products, for example by promoting and expanding the EU Ecolabel for Retail Financial Products¹⁵. At the same time, governments should actively disincentivise brownfield and antisocial investment, whether by households or the financial sector, starting by removing any tax incentives or subsidies in these areas.
- **Establish a new Commission Vice-Presidency for a Caring Society**, in order to bridge silos and deliver the green caring agenda in practice; a call that has by now – in slightly different terminology - reached cross-partisan support in the European Parliament¹⁶ and is put forward by civil society organisations alike. This new position would function as a bridge between all the Directorates-General whose mandate includes caring for people (either now or in the future), climate or the

¹³ See Political Brief Climate Emergency and Welfare States https://gef.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GEFPolitical_Brief_Climate_Emergency_and_Welfare_States.pdf

¹⁴ See Political Brief Climate Emergency and Welfare States (supra)

¹⁵ Footnote text 15: See Joint Research Centre (n.d.). Retail financial products. <https://susproc.irc.ec.europa.eu/product-bureau/product-groups/432/home>

¹⁶ Joint letter by cross-partisan Members of the European Parliament to the Members of the European Council: A call to make Future Generations a priority in the next political cycle <https://fitforfuturegenerations.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/MEP-open-letter-FG-EN-Final-2.pdf>

environment. The portfolio can be mirrored at the Council level in the form of a recurring Green Care Summit to bring together the relevant ministries from all the Member States.

Caring beyond EU borders

It is an illusion to view a green caring society in Europe as a solely internal affair. Centring our EU governance, social fabric and economy around the interconnected areas of human and environmental care has also a strong international dimension. First, impacts of the ecological crisis and the actions it is being fed by, don't recognise borders. This is quite similar for pandemics and other public health-risks. Second, the geopolitical context has a huge impact on internal European resilience and wellbeing of EU citizens, and therefore on the EU's potential to develop a green caring society. In an EU heavily concerned with competitiveness, security and migration, democratic actors have to come to terms with the need to rethink Europe's place in the world. A positive basis, built on trust and respect that enable mutually beneficiary partnerships and collaboration is indispensable. Finally, honouring the principle of care, as defined in the introduction of this policy brief, means essentially thinking – caring - beyond borders; caring for the planet, and all life on it.

To do so, we must minimise the harmful effects of our current and future care systems on the rest of the world (the care drain, for example), while maximising the positive ones. The European Union should also support the emergence of a global green care strategy to address the chronic neglecting of and underinvestment in human and non-human care systems. It already has the governance framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to fall back on, which in its turn needs to be revamped with efforts to bring us on track with the goals. Key avenues for EU action include:

- **Focus on the prevention of harm to human potential and nature at international forums.** Preventing harm is not just the most cost-effective strategy, but is also consistent with a rights-based approach, intergenerational equity and the SDGs. It means implementing the Paris Agreement and other multilateral environmental agreements, and investing in education, early childhood, and fundamental rights including but not limited to women's rights. The EU can do more at international forums to enable prevention of harm, for example through promoting a systematic use of a version of its own *Do No Harm principle* (see earlier), or of a similar governance mechanism.
- **Identify and scale up win-win programmes and partnerships** for effective human care systems that respect planetary boundaries, with a focus on collaborations with the countries most vulnerable to the twin crisis, from socio-economic, demographic and environmental angles. This can include, for example, working together on nature-based solutions that help generate income for older people¹⁷. It should also include the promotion and collaborative development of whole-life (i.e. from birth to death) resilience policies. Investing in mutually beneficiary partnerships is crucial to maximise the EU's positive impact – and to minimise the negative ones – on the rest of the world; and it is equally critical for the delivery of a green caring society that is resilient and safe at home in Europe.
- **Finance green caring societies beyond EU borders.** The investment gap for restoring nature is estimated by the UN to be 700 billion US dollars per year (Farand, 2020), while the gap for establishing a universal social protection floor for low- and middle-income countries is estimated at 1.2 trillion US dollars (Duran-Valverde et al., 2020). It is therefore essential to help unlock innovative public finance to fund a universal, sustainable care system that both caters for human

¹⁷ One such example being biochar production, which is currently being tested in several Asian countries.

needs and protects ecosystems. This also means supporting the creation of a greener, fairer global tax system at the UN, OECD and G20.

- **Confer rights on future generations and nature.** This would be a powerful means of turning the newly recognised human right to a healthy environment into reality and the EU should be a vocal advocate for these rights at the international level.

Upcoming international opportunities to make progress on these topics include the Summit of the Future and the next climate and biodiversity Conferences of the Parties (COPs), all in 2024, and the Second World Summit for Social Development, in 2025. The European Union must come to the negotiating table with credible proposals that address both the finance and action gaps on SDGs, climate and biodiversity, and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Drawing lessons from a legislative term (2019-2024) marked by a pandemic and an exacerbated ecological crisis, while also building on the successes of the European Green Deal, Health Union, and Care Strategy, democratic actors in the EU can seize the opportunity to unify green and care policy strands. By doing so, they can create a green caring society where citizens thrive within the planet's ecological limits. This unified approach has the potential to significantly enhance public support for the European project and ensure a sustainable, resilient future for all.

All the above-mentioned political proposals to move in such a direction depend on the same prerequisite. If we are to recognise the crucial importance of care and carers while also rising to the challenges posed by the urgency of the ecological crisis, it is essential that we stop assessing the state of our societies purely on the basis of GDP. Instead, the EU needs to focus its internal and external policymaking on alternative indicators and processes, in accordance with the SDGs. As a first step, the European Commission could adopt a limited set of indicators to complement GDP, both to guide its own domestic policy and to redefine the terms of the debate around wealth and competitiveness at the international level. It could draw on the experiences of, for example, the Netherlands and Italy¹⁸.

Unblocking this initial pressure point would pave the way for concrete steps towards resolving the twin crisis and creating the right conditions for the emergence of a green caring society, both at home and beyond the EU's borders.



¹⁸ See CBS (2023). Monitor of Well-being and the Sustainable Development Goals 2023. <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/dossier/dossier-well-being-and-the-sustainable-development-goals/monitor-of-well-being-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-2023> and Blazey, A., Lelong, M., & Giannini, Fl. (2022). The Equitable and Sustainable Well-being Framework in Italy. OECD. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/the-equitable-and-sustainable-well-being-framework-in-italy_4f48c504-en

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About GEF's Policy Hub

The Green European Foundation (GEF) is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate and to foster greater citizen involvement in European politics. GEF strives to mainstream discussions on European policies and politics both within and beyond the Green political family. The foundation acts as a laboratory for new ideas and offers cross-border political education and a platform for cooperation and exchange at the European level.

GEF's Policy Hub is centred on a Knowledge Communities methodology, fostering networks for knowledge production, exchange, and dissemination. It tackles key European issues, particularly related to the intersecting domains of energy, climate, social, and economic affairs. Ultimately, our Policy Hub aims to deliver ideas and proposals that can inform and incentivise policies for an equitable and systemic green transition.

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