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Challenging the Global North's Clean Energy Transition



Photo by [American Public Power Association](#)

It was a dream team of activists and scholars who conducted a whirlwind advocacy tour of Europe at the end of May. They visited Germany, Belgium, and the UK to challenge the conventional notion that Europe's energy transition is "clean" and to tell stories about the impact of Europe's transition on people living in "sacrifice zones" in the Global South. Toward that end, they met with European Parliament members, NGO and social movement representatives, and journalists on their four-day tour. They participated in five public events in three cities. And they were part of an unusual art exhibition in London. Sponsored by the Ecosocial and Intercultural Pact of the South and the Global Just Transition project of the Institute for Policy Studies, this advocacy and lobbying tour was

a follow-up from the Manifesto for an Ecosocial Energy Transition from the Peoples of the Global South published earlier this year.

The delegation members, who were all part of the drafting of the manifesto, represented different regions of the Global South. Nigerian activist Nnimmo Bassey heads up the Heart of Mother Earth Foundation, Indian activist-researcher Madhuresh Kumar represents the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, and Fijian international human rights lawyer Kavita Naidu works with the Climate Action Network in Australia, while Brazilian-Spanish activist-scholar Breno Bringel, Venezuelan linguist and ecofeminist Liliana Buitrago, and Argentine sociologist and philosopher Maristella Svampa are all affiliated with the Ecosocial and Intercultural Pact.

The mission of the trip was to inject Global South perspectives into current European policy discussions around energy and environment, with special emphasis on critical minerals, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, climate debt and the new Loss & Damage Fund, due diligence legislation, and ongoing trade negotiations. The delegates wanted to hear how best to work in solidarity with European allies to advance mutual climate justice goals and to combat a rising tide of far-right sentiment.

The delegation also aimed to publicize the manifesto and elevate its demands within Europe. It explained the Global South critiques of the hegemonic green transition, while also supporting the advocacy of European networks in raising the Global South demands. In this way, the delegation aspired to help reshape the narrative of climate justice in Europe to reflect the perspectives and concrete needs of the Global South.

The primary concern of the delegation was to highlight the problem of “Green colonialism.” The “clean energy” transition in Europe depends on raw materials like lithium and cobalt from the Global South. And the race to reduce carbon emissions has led to the “offshoring” of carbon-heavy industry and agriculture to poorer countries followed by a tax on imports that don’t meet strict EU regulations on carbon content (the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism). The Global South, in other words, absorbs carbon from Europe while sending the raw materials that Europe uses to further reduce its own carbon footprint.

The trip coincided with Europe’s ongoing scramble to find alternative sources of energy to substitute for Russian natural gas imports. That has meant not only a return to coal production at home but the securing of new fossil fuel imports from abroad. Europe had banked on using natural gas in its transition from oil and gas to renewable energy. The war has complicated that strategy, forcing Europe to source its gas from the United States and

the Gulf region. Meanwhile, Europe is also looking to identify new sources of critical materials to replace those originating in China. This has pushed the EU to secure new partnerships in the Global South and boost mining at home.

The focus of policy discussion at the end of May in Europe, particularly in the European Parliament in Brussels, was indeed on these critical minerals. The MEPs were debating a proposed Critical Raw Materials Act, which aims to make Europe more self-reliant around 34 critical minerals. Some aspects of the Act are commendable—particularly the emphasis on recycling and home-shoring the mining and processing in a way that reduces extractivism in the Global South.

But when combined with provisions in new EU trade agreements to ensure access to critical minerals, the European approach becomes more ominous. The EU’s recently concluded free trade agreement with Chile, for instance, limits the latter’s ability to supply local producers with critical materials like lithium at cheaper prices in order to build up its own clean-energy industries. This becomes an obstacle to the equally-needed energy transition in the Global South.

Reform vs. Transformation

Progressive European parties and NGOs, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, are arrayed on a spectrum from championing modest reforms at one end to making radical demands at the other.

Many environmental activists are focused on reductions in fossil fuel use as part of an emphasis on reducing overall carbon emissions. So, for instance, we had a conversation with the German special envoy on climate that centered on cutting off the German financing of fossil fuel infrastructure abroad. This is not a straightforward issue given that some governments in the Global South, eager to secure energy resources for economic development, accuse European governments of “colonialism” if they don’t supply this kind of financing (which China is happy to step in and provide). Whether it’s fossil fuel financing or Green financing, the result is often contracts for European (or U.S.) manufacturers—as with the U.S. Ex-Im Bank’s nearly billion dollars of financing for two solar projects in Angola—rather than opportunities for the countries in the Global South to nurture community-based initiatives to generate renewable energy.

Those European policymakers and civil society activists committed to more radical change are calling for an equitable clean energy transition at the global level and not just for the Global North at the expense of the Global South. They are also demanding that the Global

North reduce not only carbon emissions but overall energy consumption in the context of paying reparations as part of a longstanding climate debt to the Global South.

Although some spoke of a kind of transformation fatigue in Europe, with citizens unnerved by the multiple transformations needed across the economy, there also seems to be new opportunities for radical change. Neoliberalism, for example, has sustained considerable shocks from a combination of COVID, the obvious and longstanding problems with economic globalization, and the ongoing failure to address climate change.

Two paths lead out of this dying neoliberalism. The first is a renewed emphasis on industrial policy—more conscious state intervention into the economy—but this time with a Green hue. Europe is investing heavily into its Green New Deal, the United States is implementing the closest thing to a Green industrial policy with the Inflation Reduction Act funding, and other countries too are feeling the pressure to come up with their own matching Green industrialism.

The challenge here is twofold. The countries of the Global North believe that they are permitted such Green industrial policies, but countries of the Global South must still adhere to the old neoliberal model (via extraction and free-trade treaties). The second problem is that Green industrialism is committed to the same old approach of high consumption of goods, services, and energy that has brought the world to its current crisis. The second path heads in nearly the opposite direction: toward post-growth options. These post-growth options were, until recently, on the margins of the debate in Europe. But 20 members of the European Parliament, from five different parties, sponsored a Beyond Growth conference in May that attracted large audiences and considerable media coverage. It was particularly popular among young people and produced [a manifesto](#) for an intergenerationally just post-growth European economy. “The popularity of this event meant that mainstream politicians had to take post-growth seriously,” one interviewee said.

The tension between the ameliorative and the more transformative can be seen in something as concrete as...concrete. The current process of making concrete, cement, and other industrial materials is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. On the ameliorative side, industries are looking into carbon capture technologies or using other energy sources, such as hydrogen, for processes that require high temperatures and switching to electricity for lower temperature processes. They’re also looking into recycling, such as “secondary steel.”

On the more transformative side, there is talk of the circular economy, of using less concrete, fertilizer, and so on. “But it’s harder to push this,” said another interviewee. “It’s not as sexy.”

Inside vs. Outside Strategies

In some countries, climate policies are not high on the national agenda or there are few opportunities for civil society to have a say in government.

In Europe, however, climate is very much at the center of policymaking. According to one interviewee, 70 percent of laws debated in the European parliament cover climate, environment, or energy. And European civil society have multiple opportunities to engage with policymaking at the national and regional levels.

This inside game, however, can be frustrating, given the slowness of the process, the often-narrow field of operations, and the power of the corporate sector. After our delegates presented to the Left Party delegates at their plenary session in the European Parliament, for instance, the MEPs were hustled out of the assembly hall to prepare the room for the next event: a luncheon sponsored by the cruise ship industry, a notorious consumer of fossil fuels.

The inside-outside dynamic does not entirely map onto the reform-transformation dichotomy. The event on post-growth alternatives, for instance, was an initiative of parties in the European Parliament. Moreover, the MEPs are addressing climate justice through a number of initiatives on supply chain due diligence—on conflict minerals, deforestation, and corporate conduct on human rights and environment.

The European Commission, effectively the European Union’s executive body, is currently controlled by center-right parties because they received the largest vote share in the last elections. There are no Left or Green Party representatives. But there are also no far-right commissioners.

Energy and environment are currently the focus of European policy, under the combined guidance of President Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democrats in Germany) and Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans (Labor Party in the Netherlands). But that could shift after the next elections, scheduled for June 2024. Public opinion polls currently suggest that the center-right European People’s Party, the Social Democrats, the liberal Renew Party, and the Greens will all lose seats. The Left would gain some seats, but the biggest winners so far are parties on the far right. As a result, the political center on the Commission is likely to shift to the right.

Such a shift would translate into a change of focus—away from climate and toward “security.” Consequently, the nature of the inside-outside game would change, with less access for environmental groups and considerably less openness to input from progressive Global South voices.

The Global South remains an outside player in European politics. Various countries or blocs can negotiate access or privileged relationships. But the playing field is not level. For some NGOs, the question then is how can the Global South acquire more power in negotiations. This can take the form of cartel-like politics: those countries in the Global South that have critical resources can leverage their near-monopoly in exchange for more money, more access, or a higher status in the global supply chain (as Botswana did with “beneficiation” in the diamond industry). Or it can take the form of leveraging the protection of natural resources, such as the preservation of the Amazon rainforest or leaving the oil beneath the Yasuni National Park in Ecuador.

Partnerships

To build its competitive advantage vis a vis the United States and China, the EU is all about “partnerships.” First among those are trade agreements.

One of the trade agreements currently under discussion is with Mercosur, the South American trade bloc that includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. The updated agreement has been delayed but Commission President von der Leyen has pledged to conclude negotiations by year’s end. The Commission is reflecting environmental concerns, for instance by proposing a sustainability clause that addresses deforestation in the Amazon. But progressives have still criticized the agreement for not sufficiently addressing environmental issues or the concerns of indigenous communities. European agricultural lobbies have also been lukewarm about the agreement.

But there is pressure on MEPs to get behind FTAs like the one with Mercosur. “If we don’t say yes to FTAs, we won’t have partnerships – and China will take it up,” one MEP told us.

Other MEPs see the negotiations as an opportunity. “The Mercosur agreement was originally negotiated in the 1990s, so it’s not up to the standards of current trade agreements,” another MEP said. “So, this gives us an opportunity to talk about the Global South, about deforestation, environmental destruction, and the rights of minorities, indigenous communities, and landless farmers. It allows us to ask the question: what kind of trade is fit for the twenty-first century?”

This, too, is the approach of Mia Mottley’s Bridgetown Initiative. Though the first version focused on financing, the 2.0 version of the framework presented by Barbadian Prime Minister Mottley in April also identifies trade as one of six key action areas: “Create an international trade system that supports global green and just transformations.” The Global South, in its negotiations with European partners, can lead the way in defining what such an international trade system looks like.

The flip side of this more equitable trade system is one dominated by corporations. There is considerable concern among European NGOs that the Energy Charter Treaty, which gives investors the right to sue governments over policies that adversely affect their investments, is making headway in the Global South even as European governments announce their withdrawal from the treaty and begin to remove corporate-friendly provisions, like Investor-State Dispute Settlement clauses, from trade treaties.

The EU, along with the United States and several European governments, is also exploring what it calls “just energy transition partnerships” (JETP) with key countries like South Africa and Indonesia. These partnerships, focused on decarbonization, are a kind of Green structural adjustment program that pushes for reform of the economies of the target countries. But these JETPs differ from country to country and offer a possible opportunity for civil society in the Global South to critique Green colonialism and offer alternatives.

One mechanism gaining ground in recent years are debt-for-climate swaps. For countries in the Global South struggling with unsustainable debt repayments, the idea of reducing the burden through the protection of nature or the implementation of adaptation policies will be attractive. International financial institutions are quite bullish on these swaps. But most analyses suggest that they won’t substantially reduce either global carbon emissions or the debt burden of heavily indebted countries.

Another form of partnership is with local communities. Given the frequently undemocratic and corrupt nature of national governments in the Global South, the EU is exploring more direct relationships with affected communities. On the one hand, these partnerships would increase transparency through greater consultation with local communities (for instance in the formulation of trade agreements). On the other hand, funds for loss and damage could be channeled directly to most-impacted areas rather than to national governments, and grassroots movements could be part of the process of identifying and quantifying the damage as well as encouraging local, bottom-up approaches.

The influx of money at the local level, however, could serve to divide communities. Moreover, these “partnerships” with local communities rarely encourage sufficient public

consultation. The absence of prior and informed consent from communities in the new “sacrifice zones” in the Global South means that resource extraction takes precedence over democratic decision-making.

Follow-up

The moment is right for Global South activists to influence European policy and the agenda of European civil society. The EU is considering far-reaching climate, environment, and energy policies, and the current leadership is eager to push through as much of its platform as possible before new leaders assume power after the elections next June. European civil society, meanwhile, has been reaching out for partnerships in the Global South around specific campaigns (supply chains, loss & damage, trade, critical raw materials).

Progressive MEPs asked us to supply texts and videos of Global South activists opposing the Mercosur agreement as it is currently proposed. They wanted to hear about opposition to fossil fuel infrastructure but also to the extraction of critical minerals.

They also wanted to hear about how they could collaborate on preventing Amazon deforestation. Indeed, Europeans who have difficulty locating Peru or Ecuador on the map nevertheless identify with the Amazon. In this way, the Amazon could be the “polar bear” for the nature preservation movement: a highly visible and popular icon. MEPs who otherwise have difficulty persuading voters of the importance of the Global South can “sell” the Amazon as the anchor for a climate justice platform that prioritizes the rights of nature.

NGOs in Brussels emphasized that there was an opportunity for Global South activists and their European partners to advocate for positions through commission consultations and through the legislative process via amendments. Right now, for instance, the [new Critical Raw Materials coalition](#) is organizing a letter from Global South organizations to communicate to the European Union the specific environmental, labor, and other concerns related to the extraction of lithium, cobalt, and other strategic minerals.

The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism has passed. It will hit the Global South with a double whammy. Exporting countries dependent on European markets—like Senegal’s fertilizer producers—will suddenly find that their carbon-heavy products are no longer competitive. And the money raised by the border tax will go to help European industries—not industries in the Global South—to reduce their carbon footprint.

The CBAM now enters a stage of impact assessment. This is where Global South actors could push for technology transfer to help industries “clean up” their facilities to maintain access to European markets.

There was interest in research partnerships between Europe and the Global South, for instance on the question of loss & damage and the role of grassroots organizations in ensuring fair and just compensation. Equally important will be the expansion of focus to include not just natural disasters but the clean-up of old mines, extractivist infrastructure, and even large-scale “clean energy” projects.

Future follow-up might include another delegation to Europe (perhaps to southern Europe) and to countries like India. The [art event in London](#) was an exciting new way of spreading the Manifesto, and the delegation organizers are hard at work turning the Manifesto into a short music video. Plans are underway to explore the Manifesto’s implications in various sectors, like labor and the women’s movement. And the newly popular discussion on post-growth alternatives in Europe could also prove to be a way to expand the conversation of decarbonization to include biodiversity loss, the impact of climate debt and other forms of debt, and other aspects of the polycrisis affecting the planet.

John Feffer is the director of [Foreign Policy In Focus](#), where this article originally appeared.

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