



Contradictions in EU climate politics and the fight for justice

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Abstract: The European Union's approach to climate change is marked by inconsistencies that threaten climate justice. This blog post explores how the EU's shifting strategies impact global climate efforts and the need for a more solidarist, human rights-focused approach.

The European Union often presents itself as a global leader in the fight against climate change. However, the EU's actions frequently fail to match its ambitious rhetoric, creating inconsistencies that jeopardise climate justice. These inconsistencies are evident in the EU's shifting strategies post-2009, moving from strict mandatory targets to more voluntary measures and increased dialogue.

The EU's inconsistency lies in its changing approach to global climate negotiations. After the [failure](#) of the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties (COP15) in 2009, the EU shifted its strategy. Initially, the EU emphasised 'leadership by example' with strong, binding targets. However, facing political and economic challenges, it moved towards shared leadership, dialogue and optional steps.

This new strategy aimed to foster greater cooperation and mutual recognition among nations, in the hope that voluntary measures would encourage broader participation in climate action. While this shift helped secure the Paris Agreement in 2015, it also introduced [new challenges](#), particularly in ensuring that these discretionary processes translated into meaningful action.

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This shift towards voluntary measures and shared leadership can be problematic for several reasons:

1. **Diluted commitments:** Voluntary measures lack the enforcement mechanisms needed to ensure compliance. This can lead to countries setting less ambitious targets and not following through on them.
2. **Inequitable impact:** The lack of strong, binding targets disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. These communities, often in poorer regions, suffer the most from climate change while contributing the least to the problem.
3. **Eroded trust:** The EU's inconsistency undermines its credibility as a climate leader. If the EU does not follow through on its commitments, it loses trust among international partners and within its borders.

This inconsistency reflects a broader trend within the EU where some member states prioritise short-term economic interests over long-term environmental sustainability. Italy, for instance, has significant potential for renewable energy, particularly solar power, given its geographic location. However, political and economic factors have hindered the country's transition to a more sustainable energy system, especially the recent [political polarisation](#) the country is facing. Investments in renewable energy infrastructure have been inconsistent, and policies to support energy efficiency and emissions reductions have often been weak or poorly enforced. This lack of action is particularly concerning given Italy's vulnerability to climate impacts, such as heatwaves, droughts and rising sea levels. Other member states also struggle with similar issues, leading to a [fragmented approach](#) to climate policy within the EU. While some countries have made significant strides in reducing emissions and promoting renewable energy, others lag behind, creating a patchwork of efforts that lack coherence and effectiveness. This inconsistency undermines the EU's overall climate goals and diminishes its ability to lead by example on the global stage.

Consequences of EU inconsistency

The impact of the EU's inconsistent climate policies is widespread. Within the EU, citizens face increased health risks, economic instability and environmental degradation. Vulnerable populations, including the elderly, low-income families and those living in climate-sensitive areas, are hit hardest. These communities often lack the resources to adapt to climate change, making them [more susceptible](#) to its impacts.

The Global South is also significantly affected. Countries in this region, which contribute the least to climate change, suffer the most from its effects. The EU's failure to meet its climate commitments exacerbates these impacts, undermining global climate justice. For example, rising temperatures and changing weather patterns can devastate agricultural production in regions already struggling with food security. Additionally, extreme weather events can displace millions of people, creating humanitarian crises and [increasing migration pressures](#). Economic impacts are also significant. Agricultural sectors suffer from changing weather patterns, while coastal areas face threats from rising sea levels. This economic instability can

lead to increased poverty and migration pressures, as communities are forced to relocate in search of safer and more stable living conditions. The [costs of adapting](#) to climate change and mitigating its impacts can strain public finances, diverting resources from other essential services and development priorities.

[Environmental impacts](#) are another critical concern. Biodiversity loss accelerates as ecosystems fail to adapt to rapid changes. Forests, wetlands and marine environments are particularly at risk, with species facing extinction and ecosystems losing their capacity to provide essential services, such as carbon sequestration, water filtration, and flood protection. These environmental changes have cascading effects, disrupting food systems, livelihoods and cultural practices that depend on healthy ecosystems.

Recent developments have added to these concerns. In 2024 environmental groups filed a [lawsuit](#) against the EU, claiming that its 2030 climate targets for sectors like agriculture and transport are inadequate and incompatible with the Paris Agreement. In early 2025 the European Commission announced a '[Clean Industrial Deal](#)' that includes looser environmental reporting standards for small and medium enterprises, prompting criticism over weakened accountability for polluting industries.

Furthermore, an investigation revealed that investment funds labelled as 'green' [hold billions](#) in fossil fuel assets, raising doubts about the transparency and credibility of EU climate finance. Despite these contradictions, some progress has been noted: a 2025 report shows that [more European companies](#) are lobbying for ambitious climate policies, although industry associations remain largely misaligned with climate goals.

Addressing the inconsistency

To address this inconsistency, several steps can be taken:

1. **Recommit to strong targets** - the EU needs to enforce stricter climate policies with binding targets and ensure member states comply. This could involve penalties for non-compliance and incentives for exceeding targets.
2. **Invest in green technology** - increased funding for renewable energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable infrastructure is crucial. This not only reduces emissions but also creates jobs and stimulates economic growth.
3. **Support vulnerable communities** - efforts must be made to support those most affected by climate change. This includes financial aid, technology transfer, and capacity-building initiatives.
4. **Enhance cooperation** - greater cooperation between member states can lead to more unified and effective climate actions. Sharing best practices and collaborative projects can help bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Role of civil society and international actors

Civil society organisations, human rights groups, and international bodies play a crucial role in holding the EU accountable. Advocacy, awareness campaigns and legal action can pressure governments to act and ensure that climate policies reflect the needs and priorities

of affected communities. International cooperation is also essential, as climate change is a global issue that requires a coordinated response. The EU should work closely with international partners to strengthen global climate governance and promote ambitious and equitable climate action.

Unique challenge for the EU

The inconsistencies in EU climate politics underscore the complex interplay between ambitious environmental goals and the practical realities of policy implementation. Despite a robust EU commitment to leading global climate efforts, divergent national interests and socio-economic disparities often hinder cohesive action. The [recent setbacks](#) reveal a troubling gap between rhetoric and reality, with certain member states prioritising economic concerns over ecological imperatives. This discrepancy undermines the EU's credibility and exacerbates global climate justice issues, as vulnerable populations bear the brunt of climate change impacts.

To bridge this gap, the EU must adopt a more inclusive and transparent approach, ensuring that all member states are aligned in their commitment to sustainable practices, especially in light of the recent European elections. Equitable resource distribution and support for transitioning economies are critical to achieving a unified front. The path to genuine climate justice requires more than ambitious targets; it demands unwavering political will, equitable policies and collaborative efforts that transcend national boundaries. Only through such concerted action can the EU hope to fulfil its climate promises and inspire global change. The fight for climate justice is not merely a regional challenge but a global imperative, necessitating consistent and equitable policies to safeguard our planet's future.