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Natolin

THE FUTURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENSHIP IN THE EU

TellUs:
EU Environmental Policy Lab

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Executive Summary

The climate crisis represents the single greatest, yet most complex, source of concern for European citizens. This reality is all the more alarming as greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise and the situation is worsening. The climate crisis thus demands that we keep climate and environmental issues at the top of the European political agenda. Addressing this crisis, and meeting the emissions targets under the Paris Agreement will require a systemic and radical transition towards a low-carbon, sustainable societal model. As it concerns everyone, we believe this transition must involve all members of society, including citizens. In addition, we argue that fostering a common 'environmental citizenship' in the EU will greatly contribute to accelerating and facilitating this transition, while ensuring that all voices are heard and that no one is left behind.

The **first chapter** of this report focuses on the concept of environmental citizenship, and situates it in its historical, political, and philosophical contexts. Delving into the historical rise of environmental citizenship in the EU allows us to better appreciate the value of public participation in environmental governance and citizens' environmental actions. For instance, the sudden emergence of environmental movements reflects the speed at which the climate crisis is worsening, but also the consequences of political inaction or inability to implement efficient and long-term solutions. Furthermore, the fact citizens felt the need to voice their concerns and frustrations with regards to human-induced climate change reflects a growing sense of shared ownership and responsibility towards the environment. This self-proclaimed environmental citizenship is neither incompatible with traditional forms of citizenship nor dangerous to a democratic society; quite the contrary. Instead, we argue that the idea of an environmental citizenship has the potential to combine and multiply the potential of individual climate actions, and to bring them together under the aegis of a new European identity.

However, the notion of environmental citizenship remains complex and widely contested across different disciplines and schools of thought. There is thus a risk that attributing a common concept to all kinds of local climate action and allowing citizens to freely adopt an undefined rationale will result in no more than a collection of disparate, unrelated, and uncoordinated results. We thus review the arguments put forward by various academics before proposing to frame the concept of environmental citizenship in such a way that it can be understood the same way by all European citizens. For this, we highlight key principles that underpin the concept of environmental citizenship, namely: (i) the crucial importance of inclusivity and intersectionality, (ii) the rights and duties of environmental citizens at different scales, (iii) the transition to a societal model that moves beyond anthropocentrism and that offers a holistic approach to human interactions with the environment, and (iv) the necessary shift in our understanding of "value". With these principles, we believe the concept of environmental citizenship can reach its full potential and succeed in engaging more citizens in a common effort to protect the environment and achieve climate resilience.

Our **second chapter** highlights aspects of environmental citizenship that are closely connected to the fields of education, civic engagement and democratic participation. This report approaches environmental citizenship as a means of promoting environmental sustainability and of integrating environmental concerns into political action, but also as an end in itself. Whether it stems from an individual act or a collective effort, environmental citizenship needs to be approached seriously in modern political theory and recognised as a new form of political engagement. In this context, we reflect on the potential applications of environmental citizenship at local, regional, national, and international levels.

To truly become an environmental citizen, however, we must consider the institutional framework that governs our citizenship as well as our own responsibilities and duties as environmental citizens. One can demand, and should be entitled to, a high degree of socio-environmental protection together with some freedoms as well as a transparent, fair, and sound jurisdiction. However, as environmental citizens, we must then also be prepared to adapt our own lifestyles and to re-evaluate our interaction with natural ecosystems. As such, the notion of environmental citizenship must also emphasise the notion of responsibility and reflect more than just demands and expectations. To put these ideas into concrete terms, this second chapter is divided into several themes, underpinned, namely, by the field of possibilities opened by the digital sector.

The first is devoted to the education sector, which, we argue, must further include and insist on the current environmental challenges, particularly at university level. As students, we have sometimes experienced these gaps ourselves, and we believe education should be the EU's priority to ensure that both current and future generations are well equipped to address tomorrow's challenges.

The second theme refers to the growing issue of misinformation and the necessity to preserve fact-checked online spaces. The digital transformation must take shape in a coherent, peaceful, and sustainable way, and work in synergy with the green transition to provide forums where our collective resources can be shared and promoted.

The third theme outlines different proposals to better promote and track civic engagement across the EU. From citizen science to smartphone apps, we believe more can be done to engage local communities, while providing them with the right resources and information tools to support this engagement in the long-term.

The fourth theme is devoted to the stories of climate activists, reflecting on their journeys and relative successes to better highlight institutional gaps. We also discuss the value and potential of online activism as a new vector for civic engagement.

The fifth theme deals with representation systems and the (un)availability of adequate tools to voice environmental concerns. We emphasise our rights as well as our duties as environmental citizens, and the importance of democratic representation.

Finally, the sixth theme focuses on potential avenues to access the financial resources required to realise such ambitions - such as participatory budgeting. We also insist on including environmental citizens in the design of financial instruments.

The **third chapter** includes proposals that seek to encourage more sustainable lifestyles. In our current market economy, citizens are not just citizens; they are also consumers. In fact, their experience as consumers defines most of their everyday behaviours and societal dynamics. Yet our modes of production and consumption are rarely sustainable, and significant changes are required in this area. While it is important to revisit individual lifestyles and behaviours, it is perhaps even more important to provide individuals with sufficient and adequate choices. In this sense, we must thus also remain cautious not to over-emphasise the responsibility of individual citizens. We must also address the responsibility of the private and public sectors in driving sustainable consumption. Only then can the entire system change and truly encourage individuals to transition from passive consumers to proactive 'consum-actors'.

Our first set of proposals makes a case for meat reduction. Meat consumption plays an undeniably major role in human-induced global warming, environmental degradation, the deterioration of ecosystems, and rapid depletion of natural resources. We insist on the lack of education regarding the environmental impacts associated with people's diet, and propose various solutions to raise public awareness.

We then address the issue of food waste and highlight the many benefits of composting. Here again, education has a key role to play. However, we also demonstrate the crucial importance of shortening food value chains in the EU, and strategic pathways to promote and share best practices.

The third section follows a similar logic: it seeks to reduce solid waste and improve recycling systems in the EU. With the ambition to facilitate the transition to a circular economy, our intention here is to encourage the Commission to go one step further in creating a favourable environment for the reduction, re-use, and recycling of waste - and to couple these initiatives with a renewed understanding of environmental citizenship

Our fourth section examines the use of ecolabels. Labels allow citizens to make informed choices thanks to clear, accessible and reliable information. Our proposals aim to make the most of innovative digital technologies to empower environmental citizens.

Next, we analyse the environmental impacts linked to the growing number of new technologies and digital practices. To ensure that the digital transition can also be a green one, we propose different action plans to help citizens become more aware of such impacts and change some of their habits.

Our sixth set of proposals underlines the paramount importance of promoting and providing sustainable modes of transport. The transport sector was considerably hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, before governments and the EU engage in a long and costly campaign to fill these gaps, we argue this moment can be used as an opportunity to rethink public transport - both within cities, and between cities.

Lastly, in the seventh section, we focus on the theme of green pensions. The EU Taxonomy for sustainable activities could be used to implement a clear and transparent classification system allowing both investors and citizens to make more informed choices. Significant changes in this sector are not only required, but also full of opportunities.

Our **fourth chapter** discusses the notion of a just transition and its implications for environmental citizenship. The aim of this chapter is to reflect on the socio-economic challenges associated with the green transition, and to ensure that the concept of environmental citizenship is not itself exclusionary or limited to only some European citizens. We thus approach these ideas from a 360° perspective.

For environmental citizenship to truly reach its potential, it must involve all citizens - and it must benefit all citizens. In this context, social justice and equity are key elements. We argue that the green transition must be coupled with more socio-economic protection for the most vulnerable and be accompanied with new forms of social dialogue. The inclusion of a social dimension will allow for the counterbalancing of structural change through the collective efforts of governments, social and economic partners, and citizens themselves. The active and collaborative efforts of all of these actors are essential to guarantee that 'no one is left behind'.

Our first set of proposals addresses the issues of housing and affordable green energy, approaching them from the unexplored dimension of citizen participation therein. We propose the creation of a participatory body, which would decide on the allocation of certain subsidies. Equally, we discuss the possibilities of creating networks of larger households, which could negotiate lower energy rates in exchange for the prolongation of subscription times. By supporting green energy suppliers, prices would be reduced as demand would be ensured. Finally, we link these first two proposals with some reflections regarding the digital transition and what needs to be done to ensure that nobody is excluded from it - for digital tools can host a number of tools that are key to environmental citizenship, but can also deepen socio-economic inequalities.

In the second section, we devote important considerations to the role that gender equality must play in the Just Transition, by emphasising that the green transition should not perpetuate or exacerbate gender disparities. In order to ensure this, we put forward some strategies to promote gender parity in key decision making bodies and transition sectors.

Our third set of proposals underlines a number of issues pointing to the necessary transformation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The CAP plays an essential role in the EU's green transition, but can be improved to become a transition tool itself. Here, we discuss the prospects of establishing European Agricultural Cooperatives Networks as well as measures to help young farmers become active in this green transition.

Next, we present interesting opportunities involved in the process of rewarding sustainable business models. Financial incentives play a key role in encouraging European citizens to switch towards more environmentally friendly consumption behaviours, and can therefore constitute a useful tool in this context. We propose the revisiting of the EU's state aid policy to bring it in line with green goals, as well as the development of a robust EU taxonomy for sustainable activities that successfully prevents greenwashing, and the promotion of eco-responsible marketing strategies.

Our last set of proposals delves into the field of environmental taxation. While the EU has limited competences in this field and must respect the principle of subsidiarity, we argue that there is scope for further cooperation and coordination. We propose initiatives to harmonise environmental taxation, in particular for high polluting goods. Furthermore, we explore potential reforms of the Emissions Trading System as well as some implications of the possible implementation of a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

This report **concludes** by emphasising the many great possibilities that come with fostering a sense of European environmental citizenship. Our proposals demonstrate the need for both top-down and bottom-up initiatives, and the added value that each one can bring. It is our hope that this report will contribute to the important debate that surrounds the green transition, and provide some helpful ideas to ensure that all European citizens participate, contribute and benefit from the green transition. This transition is unavoidable; it will deeply transform ecological, social and economic arrangements both within the European Union and everywhere else in the world. The concept of environmental citizenship is key to understanding the social, economic and political dynamics that drive this transition, and the opportunities that emerge from creating synergies between them.