

Introduction: Social Policy and the Climate Crisis

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On the 4th April 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its summary report, approved by 195 member governments (IPCC 2022), warning that ‘Without immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, limiting global warming [within safe limits] is beyond reach’ (ibid). In its press release, the IPCC chair Hoesung Lee described the situation as being ‘at a crossroads’. Indeed, climate change has been described by the United Nation as ‘the defining issue of our time’ (UN, 2023). Over the last two decades its prominence on both international and domestic policy agendas has increased significantly. Moreover, climate change, and environmental issues more broadly, has increased presence in a range of academic disciplines including social policy. Whilst environmental issues have been discussed in the context of social policy for several decades, until recently these debates have often been at the margins of the discipline and reliant on a small number of trailblazers (Ian Gough, Meg Huby, Michael Cahill, and Tony Fitzpatrick require particular recognition here).

However, there have been rapid advancements in social policy and environment scholarship, for example, in 2022 this same journal produced the ‘Beveridge Report Anniversary Collection: Towards A Sustainable Welfare State’, produced in part with the aim of mainstreaming discussions about ‘*the kinds of reforms to income supports and public services needed to reconcile welfare states with an “eco-social” policy orientation to enable more sustainable patterns of wellbeing and flourishing*’ within the broader social policy community (Murphy and McGann, 2022: 439). Subsequently, and at the point of this themed section going to press, the Italian social policy journal *Politiche sociali* published the special issue ‘Towards a sustainable welfare system? The challenges and scenarios of eco-social transitions’ (Cucca *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, similar questions are also becoming more prevalent within the wider geography and environment literature with a special issue on ‘Sustainable Welfare Beyond Growth’ published two years prior in ‘Sustainability’ (Hirvilammi and Koch, 2020). These collections sit alongside a growing number of standalone pieces and demonstrate an increased recognition of the need for environmental issues and, most notably, the climate crisis to sit at the heart of social policy debate.

These discussions, especially those framed as ‘sustainable welfare’ or ‘eco-social policy’. have substantially increased our understanding of the relationship between welfare states and their systems on growth, what a greener welfare state might look like, and the policy instruments and measures needed for this. Moreover, there is now more scholarship from within the field of social policy that considers how best to balance and integrate social and environmental policy objectives to ensure that these work in a

complementary rather than contradictory way, and a small yet burgeoning literature on the 'just transition to a low carbon economy' (see Snell et al in this themed section for an overview of this literature). These debates raise the bar substantially, but we argue there remain substantial gaps in knowledge alongside an urgent need to catalyse on the efforts of earlier scholarship in this area.

This themed section represents a body of work inspired by the UK Social Policy Association's Climate Justice and Social Policy Group (CUSP) as part of ongoing efforts to mainstream climate change related issues within the discipline. Whilst recognising the enormous contribution of the literature in this field so far, our approach aims to provide a different perspective, drawing together new conceptual ways of thinking about climate change and climate policies, and exploring policy areas previously undeveloped within social policy (despite their significance in other fields). Our themed section represents a significant contribution to knowledge, given that to date there has been no attempt by social policy scholars to comprehensively map the intersections between social policy and climate change on a discipline-wide basis. Furthermore, scholarship within the field has usually been limited to a small number of academics who have tirelessly continued to argue for the inclusion of the issue within the mainstream. Given this, our proposed articles bring in new perspectives and voices, presenting a broader, more diverse knowledge base from which to explore the relationship between the climate crisis and social policy.

The themed section begins with a state-of-the-art piece that starts by briefly considering the relationship between social policy and climate change, outlining existing theoretical frameworks and knowledge, such as the eco-social policy and sustainable welfare approaches. The paper then presents findings from two workshops held with over 100 social policy scholars and practitioners. These were held with the intention of broadening discussions around social policy and climate change, systematically considering the relevance of climate change to a range of social policy topics (e.g. migration, crime, income maintenance etc.), and bringing in voices and scholarship not previously present within these discussions. The paper concludes with a number of practical pathways to encourage those in social policy to integrate concerns about climate change into their teaching and research.

Five articles then follow, exploring the relationship between social policy and climate change in detail and through a variety of lenses. The articles explore in depth the relationship among energy poverty, social policy, and climate change; issues at the heart of the 'just transition' debate - worker and social protection and climate change; the issue of water poverty and its connection to climate change and climate chaos; the just transition and eco-social policy approaches; and a conceptualisation of a socially inclusive transition to net zero.

The themed section is structured as follows: Stojilovska et al. explore in depth the relationship between energy poverty and climate change, and Valero et al. consider the issue of water poverty and its connection to climate change and climate chaos. These two papers bring important policy-focused material into the social policy-climate change debate. Both energy and water will be significantly altered as the climate crisis deepens as resources become scarcer and policy responses will have to change substantially. These challenges and necessary responses exist at multiple scales and are bound into geopolitics (as has become evident from the war in Ukraine and subsequent energy crisis).

Stojilovska *et al.* provide an in-depth exploration of the climate change-energy poverty-social policy nexus, something previously missing in mainstream debate. They identify both challenges associated with the climate crisis (for example, risks to survival and new geographies of energy poverty), and assess the social and environmental integration of policy solutions. They call for more social-policy-oriented research within the field of energy to ensure that the unintended social consequences of techno-economic approaches to policy are mitigated.

Valero *et al.* draw on interdisciplinary research in the field of water security. Similar to Stojilovska *et al.* they highlight the social policy challenges that changes in water systems are likely to bring (including substantial risks to health, a worsening of poverty, risks to food systems, etc.). This paper, in particular, explores the types of challenges related to water poverty around the world in the context of climate change and proposes a framework for further analysis for social policy that holistically accounts for the multiple dimensions of water poverty at the interplay of climate change associated risks. Novel contributions to our understanding of water poverty are made by broadening the framing of affordability and integrating this within existing interdisciplinary literature concerning social policy concerns on water security.

The following three papers then consider the 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy, a discourse that is rapidly gaining momentum. The term was first used in the United States in the 1990s and reflected concerns amongst Unions that jobs would be at risk as a result of environmental policies (Smith, 2017). It has become a cornerstone of climate policy since its inclusion within the United Nations/Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Climate Agreement in 2016. In the UNFCCC's words: *"The concept of a "just transition" recognises that a shift to a more sustainable economy can have significant impacts on workers and communities that are currently dependent on fossil fuels. A just transition means transforming the economy and economic system in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind"* (UNFCCC 2023).

Nenning *et al.* explore existing scholarship on the just transition and social protection considering literature on Adaptive Social Protection, Just Transition, Green New Deal, Post-Growth, and Ecological Feminism. They argue that these strands of scholarship are 'located on a spectrum between a green growth orientation and a green anti-capitalist orientation', and also differ in terms of their problematisation of the climate crisis. The authors conclude by 'identifying potential roles for social policy scholarship in supporting eco-social transitions' including the need for 'further developing empirically grounded conceptions of alternative eco-social policy institutions' and placing 'the relationship between eco-social alternatives and existing social protection institutions at the forefront of eco-social policy research'.

Cigna *et al.* also discuss the just transition; however, they do so in the context of supra- and international organisations. Using policy documents from a range of organisations including the International Labour Organization, International Monetary Fund, and the European Commission, they present an analysis of the diverse usages and understandings of 'just transition' amongst these organisations, providing an empirical, comparative overview of the different varieties of just transition in use. As they argue, international organisations are central agenda-setters for the adoption of domestic 'just transition' strategies, the paper provides a much needed empirically driven comparison of

such approaches at the supra- and international level, thereby giving conceptual and operational clarity to scholars in the fields of social policy and political economy.

Completing our set of three transition-oriented papers, Middlemiss *et al.* provide a new approach to understanding how a 'just transition' that 'leaves no one behind' might be conceptualised. The multidisciplinary group of authors draw together literature based on environment and climate justice, and policy scenarios that suggest how different aspects of daily life are likely to change as a result of low-carbon policies (for example, changes to home energy systems over the next decade), with social policy scholarship on social inclusion. They adapt the British Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM) to develop a framework that enables an analysis of who is most likely to be 'left behind' during the transition to net zero, and how, and the policy interventions necessary to prevent this.

The themed section represents a significant contribution to knowledge within the field. At no point to date have social policy scholars attempted to draw together so comprehensively the links between social policy and climate change. We argue that this themed section therefore presents a long overdue, detailed exploration into the links between climate change and social policy, and provides a state-of-the-art understanding of what the integration of the climate crisis into social policy could and, we argue, should look like. The intention of the section is that it is a 'go to' collection that consolidates, summarises, and moves forward the issues that lie at the heart of the social policy-climate change nexus.

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