



Climate Change and the Environment

Why are we discussing this?

The EU says: [“The battle against climate change and environmental damage is an urgent issue for the European Union and across the globe. To achieve a better world for us all, we need a strategy where Europe can continue leading the world on a path to sustainability and climate neutrality.”](#)

But what do you think?

What are the key issues?

Environment and climate change: Environmental quality is central to our health, our economy and our well-being. However, it faces several serious challenges, not least those of climate change, the loss of biodiversity, unsustainable consumption and production, as well as various forms of pollution.

EU environmental policies and legislation protect natural habitats, keep air and water clean, ensure proper waste disposal, improve knowledge about toxic chemicals and help businesses move toward a sustainable economy. On climate change, the EU formulates and implements climate policies and strategies, taking a lead role in international negotiations on climate. It is committed to ensuring the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement and implementing the EU’s Emissions Trading System (EU ETS). In this regard, EU countries have agreed to meet various targets in the years to come, notably reducing greenhouse gas emissions to at least 55% below 1990 levels by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050. The EU seeks to ensure that climate concerns are taken on board in other policy areas (e.g. transport and energy) and also promotes low-carbon technologies and adaptation measures. EU environment policy is based on Articles 11 and 191-193 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Under Article 191, combating climate change is an explicit objective of EU environmental policy. Sustainable development is an overarching objective for the EU, which is committed to a ‘high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment’ (Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union).

EU Green Deal: The Green Deal sets out a plan of action to make the EU’s economy sustainable by turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities across all areas of policy in a way that is fair and inclusive. The European Green Deal is the new growth strategy for an EU economy that is sustainable, cleaner, safer and healthier. It includes concrete actions to:

- ensure that there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050;
- boost the efficient use of resources by moving to a clean, circular economy;
- restore biodiversity and cut pollution;

In addition, the [European Climate Pact](#) is an EU-wide initiative aimed at engaging people, communities and organisations to participate in climate action. While, the [Just Transition Mechanism](#) (JTM) is a key tool to ensure that the transition towards a climate-neutral economy happens in a fair way, leaving no one behind.

What has the EU been doing?

Activism around climate change and the environment has developed from being a fringe political issue, to being rooted firmly in the centre of public debate, politics and public policy.

The challenges as a result of climate change are profound and complex, but political inaction on the international level has often been a stumbling block in reaching desired outcomes, despite developments such as the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#) which aims to limit global warming to “well below” 2 degrees and ideally to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The foundations of EU environmental policy date back to 1972 when the first Environment Action Programme (EAP) centred on a principle which would inform EU policy for decades, the [principle of prevention](#). In 1981, the European Commission created the [Directorate-General for Environment](#), this created a centralised foundation for EU environmental policy.

The [Single European Act \(SEA\)](#), effective in 1987, introduced an explicit legal basis for environmental legislation at an EU level. In 1990, the [European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#) was established. Introduced to aid Member States in developing, implementing and evaluating environmental policy, the EEA provided a forum for debate and discussion of environmental policy as well as reporting on environmental performance.

The EU has become increasingly active in environmental policy since the late 1980s, with many pieces of legislation introduced, such as the [Habitats Directive](#), the [Water Framework Directive](#) and the [Birds Directive](#), which is the oldest piece of EU environmental legislation.

In 1993 the [Treaty of Maastricht](#) provided the framework to allow further action on the environment. The [Treaty of Amsterdam](#), adopted in 1999, also further included environmental matters into EU treaty architecture and introduced the requirement of integrating environmental protection in a plurality of policy areas. The expansion of EU environmental policies in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s also depended on the deepening integration of environmental policy.

However, the EU has not always been able to meet the targets and objectives it sets; for example on ensuring the sustainable exploitation of sea fishery stocks, it took many years for the EU to make an impact.

The basic framework of the EU’s environmental policy can be found under a number of broad headings:

1. Environment Action Programmes: since 1973, the European Commission has published Environment Action Programmes (EAPs), that set out legislative proposals and goals for EU’s environment policy.
2. Horizontal strategies: since 2001, the EU has introduced its Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS), which aims to promote growth and jobs, but with an environmental dimension.
3. International environmental cooperation: as the EU is party to many global, regional and sub-regional environmental agreements, such as the 2015 Paris Agreement, the EU plays a key role in international environmental negotiations.
4. Implementation, enforcement and monitoring: Over the decades, the EU has amassed several hundred pieces of EU environmental legislation, such as the 1992 [Habitats Directive](#). However, their effectiveness is largely determined by its implementation by Member State authorities. Therefore, monitoring of enforcement practices by Member States is crucial to the success of the EU’s environmental policy.

Environmental policy is often identified as a problematic policy area in terms of [implementation](#). Indeed, infringements in the implementation of EU environmental law are common, particularly in the areas of [waste](#) and [water](#). In 2018, a [report](#) conducted by the Directorate-General for Environment concluded that the failure to fully implement EU environmental law represented an expense to the EU of €55 billion annually.

In a recent Eurobarometer survey from May 2021, where a question was asked about what the priorities should be for the European Green Deal, people in Ireland ranked renewable energy (67%), fighting plastic waste (59%) and supporting EU farmers to provide affordable and safe food (43%) as the top three priorities.

The EU has also been an active global player on the environment and climate change. It has external powers to enter multilateral environmental agreements such as the Paris Agreement and [has been](#) “a driving force in the establishment and evolution of multilateral conventions on a broad range of issues, including chemicals, climate change, biodiversity,

desertification, ozone-depleting substances, aviation, and waste.” The EU also focuses on capacity building in other parts of the world, particularly in developing countries where it seeks to incentivise climate action by providing funding and expertise. Aside from international environmental agreements, positive action on climate and environmental goals is increasingly a feature of the EU’s external relations more broadly. For example, the EU will now only enter [trade agreements](#) with other countries or parties if they have and remain committed to the Paris Agreement. The EU – UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, concluded following Brexit, is the first ratified EU trade agreement that is conditional on the continued application of the Paris Agreement.

Looking to the Future

The EU has [recognised](#) the challenges posed by climate change. Extreme weather events have become more common across Europe and 18 of the warmest years on record occurred in the last two decades. Predictions by scientists concerning temperature rises without urgent action “will have a devastating impact on nature, bringing about irreversible changes to many ecosystems and a consequent loss of biodiversity. Higher temperatures and intensified weather events will also result in huge costs for the EU’s economy and hamper countries’ ability to produce food.”

The future of EU environmental policy centres on the [European Green Deal \(EGD\)](#). Introduced in 2019, the Green Deal is a catalogue of policy initiatives intended to ensure that the EU is [climate neutral](#), centred around the key target of no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050. In addition to climate neutrality, it will develop a ‘[Green](#)’ economy driven by environmentally conscious growth and integrate climate neutrality in all policy areas including [clean energy](#), [sustainable industry](#), [sustainable mobility](#), [sustainable agriculture](#), [biodiversity](#), [eliminating pollution](#) and [construction](#).

An integral element of the Green Deal is the reconciliation of economy and ecology. To this end, it aims to facilitate Europe’s transition from fossil fuels and carbon intensive industries. In terms of [energy](#), the Green Deal will promote the integration of renewable energy resources while facilitating the decarbonisation of energy-intensive industries. On [transport](#), it will implement measures to promote cleaner transport methods, while on [pollution](#) the EU will introduce a zero-pollution plan. Environmental efficiency will be a critical element of Europe’s construction and renovation industry.

In order to aid in the implementation of the Green Deal, the European Commission established the [Just Transition Mechanism \(JTM\)](#). This is a key tool to ensure that the transition towards a climate-neutral economy happens in a fair way, leaving no one behind. It provides targeted support to help mobilise at least €65-75 billion over the period 2021-2027 to alleviate the socio-economic impact of the transition.

[Support](#) will be targeted at regions and activity most affected by the transition towards climate neutrality. In practical terms, the funding will support investments in SMEs, research and innovation, environmental rehabilitation, clean energy, re-training workers and job seekers programmes. Support for larger infrastructural projects will also feature including energy, transport, district heating schemes and decarbonisation projects. Member States can [access funding](#) by submitting plans for how the money will be used up to 2030.

A further instrument in terms of policy implementation is the [European Climate Law \(ECL\)](#). This is an important part of the legislative element of the Green Deal programme - enshrining a commitment to climate neutrality in law and ensuring that the EU’s commitment to climate neutrality is irreversible. It also includes measures designed to monitor the progression of environmental policy. The [European Climate Pact \(ECP\)](#) is an initiative that invites the public to engage directly with environmental issues through regional and local events.

The EU is committed to being a “global leader on climate policy and action” and therefore has made climate action a priority for its [external policy](#) through climate diplomacy, that is working with other countries and international organisations, and through climate finance, financial support for climate action in developing countries.

The [Council](#) has urged a renewed focus on the implement of the Paris Agreement and called on all parties to set ambitious goals for 2030 ahead of the UN climate conference due to take place in Glasgow in November. The Council has also led calls for countries to stop subsidising fossil fuel industries.

Such action requires significant global investment and the EU and its Member States are the “largest provider of public finance in the world”, with €21.9 billion worth of climate finance provided to developing countries in 2019. About 25% of the EU’s developing assistance funding is set aside to target global efforts on climate change. However, global action on the environment and climate change in the future will require both direct EU action and building more support for action among other countries and international organisations.

Questions for consideration

1. Does the EU Green Deal go far enough in addressing climate change?
2. How can the EU support climate action at a national and local level?
3. What are the major barriers that impact effective environmental polices?
4. What are your concerns around efforts to tackle climate change?
5. How should responsibility to tackle climate change be divided between the EU and Member States?
6. Which industries and communities need to be supported in the transition to a climate neutral economy?

More information

Listen:

- “Five Degrees of Change — Frans Timmermans”: this 2021 podcast episode from the Sunday Business Post is an interview with EU Commissioner for the European Green Deal Frans Timmermans, and is available [here](#).
- “What’s inside the European Green Deal?”: this 2019 podcast episode from the European think-tank Bruegel, discusses the EU’s Green Deal, and is available [here](#).

Read:

- “What is the Green Deal?” is a 2020 article from Politico that examines the European Green Deal in detail, and is available [here](#).
- “What are the prospects for the European Green Deal?” from Marco Siddi of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs briefly analyses the highlights and policy challenges of the Green Deal, and is available [here](#).

Watch:

- “Investing in the Future of Europe: The Green Deal”: this 2020 webinar from European Movement International discusses what the EU is doing to support the transition to a green economy, and is available [here](#).
- “How the EU fights climate change”: This short video from the European Parliament outlines the work of the EU in preserving the environment, is available [here](#).
- “The EU Climate Law explained”: This short 2020 video from EURACTIV explains what the Climate Law does, how it works and what its criticisms are, and is available [here](#).