

Civil Society and the Energy Transition: Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue in Germany and Italy

by Alessio Sangiorgio



Auswärtiges Amt

Supported by
the German Federal Foreign Office

As the race to net zero needs to accelerate in the upcoming years, climate policies are increasingly affecting citizens and companies, intensifying the urgency of a just transition. Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a role in raising awareness and keeping the attention high on climate issues, while pushing for national decarbonisation strategies. Moreover, CSOs can promote multilevel dialogue among different stakeholders and contribute to overcoming the growing polarisation on climate policies. Dialogue is crucial between CSOs as well, especially to promote cooperation between unions and environmental groups that can help build a fair transition. CSOs

may also act as impartial advisors to both institutional and private sector stakeholders, offering a data-driven point of view on a range of environmental issues. Therefore, promoting the dialogue and exchange of best practices between German and Italian CSOs may contribute to enacting a just and inclusive transition in both countries.

CSOs as promoters of multi-stakeholder dialogue

CSOs in both countries have been at the forefront of climate debate over the years and have demonstrated their potential to foster dialogue among diverse stakeholders, pushing for more

Alessio Sangiorgio is Junior Researcher in the Energy, Climate and Resources Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

This commentary presents some of the key issues discussed during a workshop organised by IAI, which brought together civil society representatives from both Germany and Italy. The event is part of a broader IAI project, "An Italian-German Dialogue on Energy Security and Transition amid Russia's War on Ukraine", supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.



ambitious targets from which private and institutional actors might shy away. This can be done both at the national and European levels, with CSOs having recently been involved in climate discussions through public consultation to design the National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) in the framework of European energy governance. They are also crucial in the implementation of the transition at the local level as they are often in direct contact with local communities; therefore, they represent the ideal player to design context-specific solutions and to promote them in multi-stakeholder dialogues, while at the same time channelling public concerns for environmental and social impacts.

This is well exemplified by the case of Civitavecchia coal plant phase-out in Italy. The plant, initially destined for conversion to gas, was ultimately decommissioned to be replaced by offshore wind farms, largely due to dialogue between local CSOs, such as WWF Italy and Legambiente, also involving trade unions, local authorities and energy companies.¹ This kind of CSO-initiated dialogue has been key to address social aspects of the transition in Germany as well, for example through the Sector Dialogue on Automotive Industry.² This aims to integrate social sustainability criteria into the

automotive sector by bringing together representatives of the civil society, such as Germanwatch and Transparency International Deutschland, along with institutional actors and private companies. However, the potential for CSOs to stimulate cooperation in Germany and Italy is not without challenges. Growing polarisation around climate policies, fears over the costs of the transition and the slow pace of structural reforms may be difficult to overcome.

Dealing with growing polarisation

Climate policies have become a divisive issue in Italy and Germany, and the subsequent political polarisation creates challenges for social dialogue.³ The Scholz coalition government, comprised of the Greens, Liberals, and Social Democrats, has been tested on its climate approach due to internal disagreements among the three parties. Moreover, the energy crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created an opening for the opposition party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has capitalised on public discontent by promising to slow down the transition.⁴ Similarly, in Italy, climate issues have become highly polarised. Even if the right-wing narrative has increasingly acknowledged the necessity of the transition, situations of conflict arise

¹ Andrea Balocchi, "Parco eolico offshore: passi avanti per il progetto galleggiante condiviso", in *Infobuildenergia*, 26 October 2023, <https://www.infobuildenergia.it/?p=146289>.

² German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, *Sector Dialogue Automotive Industry – Guideline for the Core Element: Reporting*, November 2023, <https://www.bmas.de/EN/Services/Publications/a433e-6-automotive-industry-guideline-reporting.html>.

³ Maik Herold et al., "Polarization in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Ten European Countries", in *MIDEM Studies*, No. 2023-1 (April 2023), https://forum-midem.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/TUD_MIDEM_Study_2023-1_Polarization_in_Europe_.pdf.

⁴ Hans Pfeifer, "Germany's Far-Right AfD Profits from Climate Change Spat", in *Deutsche Welle*, 6 January 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-65797438>.



when the debate focuses on the best strategies to cope with this process.⁵

As climate discourse becomes more polarised, CSOs find it more difficult to foster multi-stakeholder dialogue. This is especially testing for the Italian civil society, which has traditionally been scarcely engaged by political institutions and the private sector, leaving CSOs excluded from climate governance and unable to raise issues in debates on the social dimension of the transition.⁶ In principle, CSOs may contribute to reducing polarisation by providing citizens with evidence-based information and promoting public participation in climate discussions. Many CSOs specialise in specific issue areas, such as air pollution, renewables or green mobility, developing expertise and data-driven information that could be used to facilitate informed discussions. However, even when their dissemination efforts are grounded in empirical research, their findings may still be challenged as part of a one-sided narrative. Furthermore, CSOs may encourage a more diverse public participation in climate discussions. Indeed, polarisation on the matter is often linked to factors like age, education, household income and political affiliation.⁷ CSOs may offer

spaces where people from diverse social backgrounds can engage with the issue directly, fostering a constructive dialogue.

Ensuring a just transition

Decarbonisation carries risks of significant social inequalities if not managed orderly. Both Italy and Germany are exposed to job losses, diminished industrial competitiveness and decreased energy security. Italy has a historically fragile job market, marked by high unemployment, which makes it even more difficult to integrate “climate losers” into the transition. Similarly, the decarbonisation of German industries, such as the chemicals and steel sectors, may create significant pressure on existing jobs.⁸

Against this backdrop, there is a need for coordination between environmental groups and trade unions to implement decarbonisation strategies that also consider workers’ needs, particularly in carbon-intensive sectors. One way to achieve this is by supporting the creation of just transition dialogues, bringing together governments, employers and unions to plan more comprehensive social safety nets for those segments of the population penalised by the transition.

However, this model presents challenges in both Germany and Italy. Both countries have traditionally strong and heterogeneous unions.

⁵ Stefano Ghinoi and Bodo Steiner, “The Political Debate on Climate Change in Italy: A Discourse Network Analysis”, in *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2020), p. 215-228, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i2.2577>.

⁶ Maria Kousis, Donatella Della Porta and Manuel Jiménez, “Southern European Environmental Movements in Comparative Perspective”, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 51, No.11 (2008), p. 1627-1647 DOI 10.1177/0002764208316361.

⁷ Maik Herold et al., “Polarization in Europe”, cit.

⁸ Cesar Barreto, Robert Grundke and Zeev Krill, “The Cost of Job Loss in Carbon-Intensive Sectors: Evidence from Germany”, in *OECD Economics Department Working Papers*, No. 1774 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/6f636d3b-en>.



For example, only one member of the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB), the United Services Trade Union, is part of the German Climate Alliance, the main German civil society forum for promoting climate objectives. By contrast, unions representing workers in carbon-intensive industries, like the Industrial Mining, Chemistry and Energy Union (IG BCE), have been largely outspoken against German environmental groups pushing for the phase-out of coal and nuclear. On the contrary, the Construction, Agriculture and Environment Workers Union (IG BAU) has pushed for more ambitious climate policies than those proposed by the government, stating that industrial growth and climate policy can be complementary and promote opportunities for development.⁹ In Italy, the dialogue between unions and environmental groups has been equally challenging, but recent attempts to cooperate have emerged in the Climate-Work Alliance (*Alleanza Clima Lavoro*), a platform to promote dialogue between environmental groups and unions, composed among others of FIOM-CGIL, FILT-CGIL, FLAI-CGIL, Kyoto Club, Legambiente, WWF Italia and Greenpeace.¹⁰

⁹ Birgit Kraemer, "Germany: Trade Unions' Approach to Climate Change Policies", in *Eurofound*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/node/19786>.

¹⁰ Italian Chamber of Deputies Budget Committee, *Audizione dell'Alleanza Clima Lavoro*, 12 March 2024, <https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/documentiAcquisiti/COM05/Audizioni/leg19.com05.Audizioni.Memoria.PUBBLICO.ideGes.32922.12-03-2024-09-22-40.114.pdf>.

Institutional advocacy and participation in climate governance

In both Italy and Germany, CSOs' advocacy is not always effective in addressing policy gaps and promoting structural reforms. In Italy, CSOs' efforts to have a larger role in climate governance are challenged by a centralised approach to energy and infrastructural planning which makes it more difficult for civil society organisations to bring their voices to institutional stakeholders.¹¹ In Germany, due to its federal system, regional (*Länders'*) governments are sometimes more receptive to the social consequences of the transition for their own constituencies. However, this does not necessarily translate to tangible benefits because compensating companies and workers affected by the transition requires financial means that are not always available at the regional level.

CSOs effectiveness for legislative change is also highly volatile. Traditionally, they can mobilise public support for climate reforms when specific events or crises capture public attention. In these cases, momentum can be channelled into pressuring governments to enact more ambitious climate targets. For

¹¹ Carlo Frappi and Arturo Varvelli, "Le strategie di politica energetica dell'Italia. Criticità interne e opportunità internazionali", in *Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali*, No. 12 (April 2010), p. 98-114, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/qri12_0.pdf; Natalia Magnani and Giorgio Osti, "Does Civil Society Matter? Challenges and Strategies of Grassroots Initiatives in Italy's Energy Transition", in *Energy Research and Social Science*, Vol. 13 (March 2016), p. 148-157, DOI 10.1016/j.erss.2015.12.012.

example, in Germany, a coalition of 40 environmental and development organisations significantly influenced the country's climate ambitions through a comprehensive action plan, the German Civil Society Climate Protection Plan 2050, by capitalising on the public attention to climate issues generated by the Paris Agreement.¹² Italy has not witnessed a similar joint effort; Legambiente, for example, launched its own proposals before the 2022 elections, but the lack of a broad coalition behind it and the absence of external events arousing public interest for climate action, minimised the document's influence on the public debate.¹³

On another level, European climate governance offers CSOs a way to influence national legislators. Under the regulation on the governance of the Energy Union and climate action, member states are asked to carry out public consultations with citizens, businesses and competent authorities to draft the updated NECPs, the documents outlining how EU countries aim to reach its energy and climate targets for the period 2021-2030. The regulation specifically calls for inputs from civil society to better design transition strategies that address the social dimension.

¹² Klima-Allianz Deutschland, *Klimaschutzplan 2050 der deutschen Zivilgesellschaft*, April 2016, <https://www.klima-allianz.de/publikationen/publikation/klimaschutzplan-2050-der-deutschen-zivilgesellschaft>.

¹³ Legambiente, *La transizione ecologica che serve all'Italia*, September 2022, <https://www.legambiente.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Dossier-Legambiente-La-transizione-ecologica-che-serve-allItalia.pdf>.

The Climate Action Network and WWF have criticised the Italian and German consultation models as inadequate, blaming both governments for having given too short of a timeframe between public consultations with CSOs and the submitting of the policy documents, which made it impossible to integrate any feedback.¹⁴ However, for the submission of updated draft plans in 2023, Germany reinforced dialogue platforms such as the Climate-Neutral Electricity System Platform and the Alliance for Transformation,¹⁵ which took the form of roundtables on transition issues involving different stakeholders, while Italy launched new public consultations through parliamentary hearings and online questionnaires.¹⁶

¹⁴ Climate Action Network Europe and WWF, *Public Participation in National Energy and Climate Plans. Evidence of Weak and Uneven Compliance in Member States*, April 2023, <https://www.wwf.eu/?10023916>.

¹⁵ German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, *The Climate-Neutral Electricity System Platform – In Dialogue for a New Market Design*, May 2024, <https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/EN/Dossier/the-climate-neutral-electricity-system-platform.html>; German Federal Government, *Focus on Climate-Neutral Economy, Digitalisation and Sustainable Work*, 14 June 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/schwerpunkte/klimaschutz/alliance-for-transformation-2052454>; and *Viel mehr als Mülltrennung und Dosenpfand*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/nachhaltigkeitspolitik/allianz-fuer-transformation-2255608>.

¹⁶ Italian Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security, *Quesiti consultazione pubblica 2024 PNIEC*, 26 February 2024, <https://www.gse.it/PNIEC>.



Looking ahead

As both Italy and Germany try to decarbonise their economies, CSOs will need to cooperate with governments and the private sector to address the social consequences of the transition. The Italian and German civil societies have the potential to foster dialogue among different stakeholders (European, national and local; public, private and individual) and to increase the general level of ambition of climate policies by raising public awareness and promoting engagement.

CSOs may act as intermediaries between the public and governments, making them accountable, and contribute to an independent collection of data and monitoring of green pledges. CSOs' action can be especially effective at the local level, where they can promote participatory planning that gives voice to communities and at the same time disseminate information and data about possible consequences of climate change. This communication can help to raise awareness and stimulate new ideas and initiatives to actively impact and promote the social dimension of the transition. To achieve this, CSOs' action at the local level should aim to have long-term horizons, rather than focus on short-term projects or one-off events.

However, such engagement efforts are challenged by growing political polarisation and fears over the possible losses brought about by an ill-managed transition. While heterogeneity among CSOs – with trade unions and environmental groups representing often diverging interests – may

further complicate cooperation, it may also represent an opportunity for developing solutions for social equity that do not preclude climate ambition. Large coalitions of CSOs may promote the inclusion of workers' rights and social protection mechanisms in just transition policies at the national and European levels, while at the same time advocating for prioritising clean energy and infrastructural projects that provide job opportunities not only for highly skilled workers, but for the labour force at large. CSOs should therefore leverage their advocacy efforts and coordinate at the bilateral and European levels to increase their reach, while at the same time remaining connected to the local level to design context-tailored strategies for the implementation of the transition.

10 May 2024

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)

- 24 | 20 Alessio Sangiorgio, *Civil Society and the Energy Transition: Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue in Germany and Italy*
- 24 | 19 Tommaso Luisari, *The New European Defence Industrial Strategy: A Political Matter*
- 24 | 18 Irene Paviotti, *Public Opinion and Development Policy: Alignment Needed*
- 24 | 17 Giulio Pugliese, *Kishida's Visit to Washington and East Asia's 21st-Century Geopolitical Minilaterals*
- 24 | 16 Riccardo Alcaro, *Iran's Retaliatory Attack on Israel Puts the Middle East on the Brink*
- 24 | 15 Riccardo Alcaro, *Rhetorical Confrontation Is No Substitute for the EU's Iran Policy*
- 24 | 14 Daniela Huber, *Israel/Palestine and the Normative Power of the "Global South"*
- 24 | 13 João Paulo Nicolini Gabriel, *Russian Nuclear Diplomacy in the Global South, and How to Respond to It*
- 24 | 12 Piero Barlucchi, *From Atalanta to Aspides: Old and New Challenges for EU Maritime Operations*
- 24 | 11 Filippo Simonelli, Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Leo Goretti, *The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?*