



A globally just and inclusive transition? Questioning policy representations of the European Green Deal

Håkon da Silva Hyldmo^{a,*}, Ståle Angen Rye^a, Diana Vela-Almeida^{a,b}

^a Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NO-7491 Trondheim, Norway

^b a Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 8, 3584 CS Utrecht, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Climate change mitigation policies around the world are increasingly formulated as ‘green deals’ characterized by comprehensive packages of (‘green’) economic and societal reforms intended to bring about a just and inclusive transition to a low-carbon economy. This paper takes as its starting point what we see as a fundamental tension underlying the logic of these policies: despite making ambitious claims about the ethical merits of the transition they aim to bring about, their implementation depends on the extraction of massive amounts of raw materials. Most of these materials will be sourced from the Global South, where the negative ecological and social impacts will be felt. Empirically we explore how this tension is reflected in the European Green Deal, the most comprehensive of the green deal initiatives to date. Analyzing 195 policy documents from the European Union, we find that the role played by the European Green Deal in driving negative impacts beyond its borders is effectively silenced in official discourse. This enables the propagation of a narrative that justifies the dominant paradigm of green growth by portraying the European Green Deal as undertaking a globally ‘just transition’ that ‘do no harm’ and ‘leaves no one behind’. However, it also results in discursive contradictions and inconsistencies that undermine the logic and legitimacy of the European Green Deal. These contradictions and inconsistencies, we argue, provide a possible entry point for efforts to improve the just and inclusive outcomes from the European Green Deal.

1. Introduction

Climate mitigation policies around the world are increasingly being formulated as ‘green deals’ characterised by extensive economic and societal reforms intended to bring about ‘just and inclusive’ transitions to a low-carbon economy through ‘green’ economic growth and technological innovation (Almeida et al., 2023; Galvin and Healy, 2020; MacArthur et al., 2020). In this paper we take as our starting point what we see as an underlying tension at the heart of these policies: despite emphasising the importance of just and inclusive outcomes, their implementation depends on massive extraction of raw materials such as lithium, copper, and rare earth elements necessary for building a digital low-carbon economy (see Bainton et al. (2021) for an excellent treatment of this tension in the energy-extractives nexus). Most of these minerals will be extracted in resource peripheries in the Global South (Regueiro and Alonso-Jimenez, 2021) with ensuing social and environmental impacts (Andreucci and Zografos, 2022; Ball et al., 2021; Idemudia et al., 2022; Murguía et al., 2016). These impacts affect the

most materially and politically marginalised peoples in the world, and the ones who bear the least responsibility for the current environmental crises, raising important questions about *who* these transitions should be just and inclusive for. We approach these questions discursively through an empirical analysis of the policies of the European Green Deal, the most ambitious of these ‘green deal’ initiatives to date. Using the tension between resource extraction *beyond* the territories of the European Union and the implementation of a green, just, and inclusive transition *within* the European Union as an entry point, we explore the geography of the ethical commitments of the European Green Deal.

Launched by the European Commission in 2019, the European Green Deal is an ambitious new growth strategy that lays out a vision for addressing the global nature and climate crises while transforming the European Union into a fair and prosperous society with a competitive low-carbon economy (European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2019). To achieve this, the European Green Deal pursues a comprehensive agenda of economic, social and environmental objectives that will have wide-reaching impacts within the European Union and beyond

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: hakon.hyldmo@ntnu.no (H. da Silva Hyldmo).

(Chupina, 2022; Clora et al., 2021; Eicke et al., 2021; Gamarra et al., 2023; Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020; Schunz, 2022). Reflecting concerns about justice and equity, political communication from the European Union stresses the importance of ensuring that the European Green Deal is bringing about a 'just transition' that 'do no harm' and 'leave no one behind'.

Recent work on policy analysis has provided important insights into key aspects of justice and inclusiveness in European Green Deal policies. Research has examined options and challenges for designing just and green policies (Filipović et al., 2022; Sarkki et al., 2022), how costs of implementing the European Green Deal can be shared most equitably among countries in the European Union (Steininger et al., 2021), and the prospects for achieving a just transition as part of the European Green Deal in different national and regional contexts (LaBelle et al., 2021; Moodie et al., 2021; Voicu-Dorobanțu et al., 2021) and industries (Harrahill and Douglas, 2019; Merzic et al., 2022; Pianta and Lucchese, 2020). However, while this literature has made important contributions, its focus on processes, impacts and outcomes *within* the European Union fails to account for the complete geography of the ecological and social relations that fuel the production of a 'green' Europe.

To explore this geography, we draw on scholarship on climate justice. This rich and varied body of work is intertwined with, and reflective of, literature that critically challenge the paradigm of 'green growth' that underlies the design of the European Green Deal (Dunlap, 2018; Harangozo et al., 2018; Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Wiedmann et al., 2020) and argues for a more just distribution of the costs and benefits of both climate change and their solutions across time and space (Bell, 2015; Martínez-Alier, 2012; Singh, 2019; Sultana, 2022a). Early engagement with the European Green Deal drawing on this literature has critiqued its pursuit of economic growth, expansion of market mechanisms, and hopes for technological salvation (Dunlap and Laratte, 2022; Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020; Vela Almeida et al., 2023; Weber and Cabras, 2021). However, while concerns about justice is a key theme running through this literature, there has been little systematic engagement with how questions of justice and inclusivity are articulated and framed across European Green Deal policies.

Our aim here is to address these gaps in literature by undertaking a comprehensive discursive analysis that explores how the tension between the extraction of critical raw materials and a green, just, and inclusive transition is reflected in European Deal policies. Methodologically we use a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2018) and qualitative analysis drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013, 2003) of 195 policy documents from the European Union. This approach enables us to use critical discourse analysis's emphasis of interrogating and unmasking discursive representations of social conflicts (Fairclough, 2003) to analyse this tension in the European Green Deal, and to corroborate these analyses quantitatively.

Through our analysis, we show that there is a discursive silence on the tension between green and just outcomes in Europe and the harms caused by extractive practices driven by the European Green in other parts of the world; and, that this silence facilitates the representation of the European Green Deal as a globally just and inclusive transition. We highlight two key insights from this analysis. Firstly, the representation of the European Green Deal as a globally just and inclusive transition not only removes from sight the harms driven by these climate mitigation policies, but also the global historical inequalities and injustices these harms are layered on top of. By seeing extraction in the Global South as a direct policy impact of climate change policies of the European Green Deal, we bring scholarship on climate justice into direct dialogue with wider work on extraction, injustice and uneven ecological exchange. In so doing, we problematize the uncritical propagation of a transition discourse, in both policy formation and academic literature, that rely on tropes of just and inclusive transitions that normatively position the EU and other global actors as pioneers in the fight to mitigate climate change. This representation, we argue, serves to justify the current

design of the European Green Deal and stifle dialogue about alternative ways to undertake low-carbon transitions. Secondly, the failure to adequately address the tension between impacts from extraction and ambitious ethical commitments is resulting in internal inconsistencies and contradictions in European Green Deal policies. These inconsistencies and contradictions, we suggest, provide key entry points for political and academic critiques aimed at making the European Union accountable for their ethical commitments to undertake a 'just transition' that 'do no harm' and 'leave no one behind'. One way of doing so is to ask for who, according to who, and on what terms the 'green deals' proclaim to bring about just and inclusive transitions.

2. Background and theory: Climate justice, ethical commitments and the geographies of the European Green Deal

In this section we provide a brief introduction to the European Green Deal, before we delve into its ethical commitments by presenting three rhetorical devices: 'just transition', 'do no harm', and 'leave no one behind'. Finally, we discuss how the literature on climate justice can inform efforts to explore this commitment and the geographies of the European Green Deal.

2.1. Introducing the European Green Deal

The European Green Deal is an ambitious growth strategy aiming to transform the European Union into a fair and prosperous society with a competitive low-carbon economy. This strategy, which is not in itself legally binding, lays out an overarching framework for an extensive set of legislative proposals, programs and policies focused on decarbonisation, digitalisation, and improved environmental governance across a range of sectors and industries over the coming decades (Sikora, 2021). While these laws, programmes, and policies cover most aspects of economic life in the European Union, we focus here on two cross-cutting elements that are the heart of the tension between resource extraction and a just and inclusive transition explored in this paper: the European Green Deal's structures for ensuring just and inclusive outcomes and its need for raw materials.

The need for raw materials for the implementation of the European Green Deal is directly linked to its strategy of green growth that pursues further economic growth with transitioning to a low-carbon and digital economy. Replacement of carbon fossil infrastructures with a new economic system to produce, transport, store and consume low-carbon energy, and the extension of this system for further digitalisation and economic growth, will result in a massive increase in demand raw materials critical for electrification and digitalisation (Ali et al., 2017; Bazilian, 2018; Nate et al., 2021; Regueiro and Alonso-Jimenez, 2021). It should be noted here that these challenges are not restricted to the European Green Deal, but also applies to the wide range of other countries, including in the Global South, that in different ways are undertaking decarbonisation efforts (Calderon et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019).

For the European Union, current projections suggest that materials critical for the transition to a low-carbon economy greatly will outstrip their current total consumption. The European Commission (2020a) estimates that under a medium demand scenario, additional consumption of batteries, fuel cells, wind turbines and photovoltaics in 2050 for renewables and e-mobility alone will exceed total current consumption in the European Union by around twenty times for lithium, six to seven times for graphite, and four to five times for cobalt. While there are considerable efforts to increase extraction of these and other critical materials within Europe (del Marmol and Vaccaro, 2020), limited mineral reserves in the region means that large parts of this demand will be met by increased extraction rates in other parts of the world (Hool et al., 2023; Massari and Ruberti, 2013). To acquire these materials, the European Green Deal lays out a number of strategies and policies aimed at securing a stable supply while strengthening value-chain governance

through among other more stringent environmental and social standards (Hool et al., 2023; Samper et al., 2021).

The structures for achieving just and inclusive outcomes from the European Green Deal are primarily centred around the ‘Just Transition Mechanism’. This is a mechanism for funding activities intended to ensure just and inclusive outcomes *within* the member states of the European Union and their territories. The mechanism aims to mobilise around 100 billion Euro in the period 2021–2027, with increased allocations envisioned for later stages of implementation. These funds will be allocated through ‘territorial just transition plans’ in which member states identify regions and industries likely to need assistance to avoid negative impacts from the policies under the European Green Deal (European Commission, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, 2020; European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2019). In describing the intended outcomes of just and inclusive transition policies, European Union discourses highlight three ethical commitments: that the European Green Deal should bring about a ‘just transition’; ‘do no harm’; and ‘leave no one behind’. We will explore these in the next section of the paper.

2.2. Rhetorical devices and the commitment to a just and inclusive transition

These ethical commitments all have specific histories and qualities that shape their use and interpretation in European Green Deal discourse. The term ‘just transition’, in particular, has had a central position in both policy formation and academic transition literature engaging with questions of how transitions meet a set of ethical or moral standards (Heffron and McCauley, 2018; Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). The term emerged in the labour movements in the USA in the 1970s in response to concerns that strengthened environmental focus would negatively impact employment in industries unable to meet new environmental standards (Stevis and Felli, 2020). While this focus on ensuring a just transition for labour has been widely taken up in policy at national and international levels in the context of low-carbon transitions (García-García et al., 2020), the concept has grown to encompass a range of divergent meanings (Thomas, 2021; Wang and Lo, 2021). In particular, there has been a move away from a strict emphasis on workers in carbon-intensive industries in the Global North, and increasing recognition of the need to ensure that *everyone* impacted by a transition experience just outcomes (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). Importantly, this broadening of perspectives is complementing rather than supplanting existing perspectives, resulting in a high level of diversity of positions and ambiguity concerning the meaning of the concept (Bainton et al., 2021).

This diversification of meanings over time is also evident for the two other terms the European Green Deal draws upon to establish its ethical claims. The Hippocratic oath to do no harm has been a cornerstone of medical training and ethical thought for more than 2500 years (Askitopoulou, 2018a, 2018b). More recently, the principle, sometimes developed for complex interacting systems into the form ‘doing no significant harm,’ has been taken up as a prominent principle and ambition in other fields, such as humanitarianism (Anderson, 1999), knowledge production (Dilling et al., 2021), sustainable finance (Becchetti et al., 2022; Dusfk and Bond, 2022), and transition and justice studies (Goetz et al., 2017; Schmid and Nolan, 2014). Similarly, while the concept of ‘leaving no one behind’ has become a central commitment of policy initiatives across a range of societal issues and features prominently as one of the central promises of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, there are a range of different perspectives on what this entails in practice (Fleurbay, 2018; Menton et al., 2020; Weber and Cabras, 2021). This is reflected academic engagement with the term, which has spanned a number of fields, including resilience policies (Verschuur et al., 2020), poverty (Banks et al., 2020; Malerba et al., 2021), and environmental policy (Weber and Cabras, 2021; Weber, 2017).

The rich and diverse set of ideas, values and underlying these three concepts, we argue, increases both their interpretive flexibility in political discourse (Star, 2010, 1989; Star and Griesemer, 1989), and the importance of critically engaging with how they are operationalised in different policy contexts. At the centre of any enquiry into how these are concepts are operationalised is the question of *who*. *Who* should experience a just transition, to *whom* should the European Green Deal do no harm, and *whom* should it not leave behind. These questions are at the heart of work on climate justice, which we explore in the next section.

2.3. Geographies of climate justice

Literature on climate justice is concerned with the distribution of harms and goods associated with climate change, and stress the importance of procedural and recognitional justice. This includes both the effects of climate change itself and, as we are focusing on here, the effects of policies aimed at addressing climate change (Newell et al., 2021; Schlosberg and Collins, 2014; Sultana, 2022a). Emphasising the *who* and the *where* of these effects, literature on climate justice has shown how harms from climate change policies are unevenly distributed, with the politically and materially marginalised suffering the majority of costs while benefits accrue in political centres (Büchs et al., 2011; Dwarkasing, 2023).

geographical element of climate justice has increasingly highlighted impacts in the global South driven by activities of countries or groups of countries in the global North (Sealey-Huggins, 2017; Sovacool et al., 2019; Sultana, 2022b; Warlenius, 2018). A key insight from this work is that impacts of climate change and the efforts to address it are layered on top of, and further exacerbate, hegemonic power relations and existing inequalities and injustices that reinforce global patterns of capital accumulation and poverty. By seeing extraction in the global South as a direct policy impact of the climate change policies of the European Green Deal we bring this scholarship on climate justice into direct dialogue with wider work on extraction, injustice and uneven ecological exchange that highlight the negative social and ecological impacts associated with extractive practices, particularly in the global South (Bebbington et al., 2008; Jerez et al., 2021; Martínez-Alier, 2001; Smith, 2008; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). The critical perspectives provided by this literature offers an important contrast to recent research on socio-technical transitions, which has been dominated by technocratic approaches that obscure questions of power and justice in shaping the content of these transitions (Stevis and Felli, 2015).

Applying a lens of climate justice to the study of the ethical merits of the European Green Deal, then, provides two important insights. Firstly, increased extraction of raw materials is needed for the implementation of the European Green Deal (Ali et al., 2017; Bazilian, 2018; Nate et al., 2021). This is an inherent component of the climate change policies of the European Union. As such, any consideration of the ethical merits of the European Green Deal must account for the impacts of these extractive activities, including those that occur beyond the borders of Europe. Secondly, efforts to account for these impacts must recognise that the global networks of extraction and trade are the latest reiterations of centuries of deeply imbalanced, and often colonial, relations (Andreucci and Zografos, 2022; Jerez et al., 2021; Mejía-Muñoz and Babidge, 2023; Sovacool, 2019). Attention to the historicity of these relations highlights both past injustices, and how the harms caused by the drive for raw materials for green-growth transitions such as the European Green Deal is borne by the most materially and politically marginalised people of the world, and the ones that have the least responsibility for the current nature and climate crises.

3. Methods

To explore how the tension between critical raw material extraction and just and inclusive outcomes are reflected in European Green Deal discourse, we use a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative

analysis drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013, 2003) and quantitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2018). We echo Fairclough in understanding discourses as “ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the ‘mental world’ of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world” (Fairclough, 2003, 124). Policy documents are important discursive elements that simultaneously reflect and propagate specific discourses that construct the policy topic, define what can and cannot reasonably be said and thought about it, and frames the policy problems and their solutions (Goodwin, 2011). Analysing narratives in European Union policy documents, then, enables us to explore assumptions, values and geographic logic underlying the design of the European Green Deal.

In this study we have analysed 195 different European Union policy documents on the European Green Deal. We used a combination of strategic sampling and a key-word search on an open database of policy documents from the European Union to identify relevant documents. By combining these sampling strategies, we targeted both the main policies related to the European Green Deal and the wider set of policy documents covering the intersection between extraction and the achievement of a just and inclusive transition. The aim of the sampling design was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how this tension is reflected across European Green Deal discourse.

The strategic sampling was undertaken by exploring the webpages of the European Green Deal-portal on website of the European Commission¹ with the aim of covering all major policies of the European Green Deal. 28 different policy documents were identified using this approach. The key-word search for additional documents was done through the EUR-Lex database,² which contains all EU laws and the complete documents of the Office Journal of the European Union, including treaties, international agreements, legal acts, and legislation, and preparatory and working documents. The search was designed to find all documents addressing the intersection between the European Green Deal, just transition and critical raw materials,³ and resulted in the identification of an additional 167 documents, bringing the total documents analysed in the study up to 195.

These 195 documents covered a range of different types of documents, including official communications, legislation and working documents, and were authored by 47 different European Organisations. As such, the documents were written for different purposes and audiences, reflect the interests of different actors, and have different levels of authority in reproducing official European Green Deal discourses (see e. g. EU Monitor, 2023a, and 2023b for information on the hierarchy of policy documents within the European Union). The breadth and variety of this material enables us to examine these discourses across the whole landscape of European Union organizations, but also necessitates attention to the authors and types of documents that promote different narratives. A full list of all documents, including their title, author(s), document category and date of publication is available as [supplementary material](#).

Analysis of the documents was undertaken in four steps. In the first two steps we undertook a critical discourse analysis, and in the two last steps we complemented the results of this qualitative analysis with a quantitative content analysis. In the first step, we used the ‘text-query’

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019–2024/european-green-deal_en.

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html?locale=en>.

³ We used the following query: Domain: All, Exclude corrigenda: True, Date: All dates, From: 01/01/2018, To: 31/12/2022, Results containing: "Green Deal" AND just* AND "critical raw materials" In title and text, Search language: English, Exclude consolidated versions: True.

function of Nvivo to identify all document sections mentioning the European Green Deal, transition, justice, equity, raw materials, minerals, the green oath to do no harm, or leave no one behind.⁴ This search resulted in 19,815 hits. In the second step, the paragraphs surrounding these hits were analysed qualitatively and categorised into inductively generated categories during several iterative cycles of analysis aimed at identifying the main discourses on i) raw materials for the transition to a low-carbon economy; ii) undertaking a just and inclusive transition; and iii) the relationship between these. In the third step, we quantified how negative impacts from extractive activities are reflected in relation to raw materials by categorising all mentions of raw materials in the analysed documents to identify i) how many explicitly acknowledge harms associated with extraction of raw materials, and ii) how many explicitly acknowledge the implementation of the European Green Deal as a driver of these harms. In the fourth step, we assessed the prevalence of the rhetorical devices ‘just transition’, ‘do no harm’, and ‘leave no one behind’ in the analysed documents by identifying and calculating all mentions of these terms.⁵

4. Results

In the following two sub-sections we present the results of our analysis. In the first section we examine how extractive activities and the harms associated with these are represented in European Green Deal discourse. In the second section we explore how this representation intersects with the narrative of the European Green Deal as undertaking a globally just and inclusive transition.

4.1. Silencing the tension between extractivism and a just and inclusive transition in European Green Deal discourse

Examining the overarching discourse on raw materials in the European Green Deal, we find that it centres around efforts of the European Union to gain and secure access to raw materials necessary for transitioning to a decarbonised economy. These efforts acknowledge the increased demand for raw materials caused by the transition and include several interrelated strategies, including the establishment of new trade agreements with countries outside the European Union; development of new mining sites within the European Union; improved resource efficiency; resource substitution; and, increased recycling to achieve a circularity of materials and ultimately a decoupling of economic growth from resource use.

While emphasis on the social and ecological harms caused by extractive activities does not form a strong or coherent component in this discourse, the importance of reducing environmental and social harms implicitly underlies many of the strategies and policies of the European Green Deal. This is reflected, among other, in the Critical Raw Materials Act and the new EU Batteries Regulation both of which devote considerable attention to the issue of raw materials and combine an emphasis on securing access with attention to measures aimed at avoiding negative impacts through greening of value chains and improved sourcing and monitoring. Importantly, however, while this discourse contains ample statements talking about the European Union’s “principles for sustainable raw materials underline the importance of sound environmental management” (European Commission, European External Action Service, 2021, p. 10) and the importance of ensuring a “proper framework for a sustainable, environmentally neutral and responsible sourcing” (European Commission, Directorate-General for

⁴ The following search string was used: "green deal" OR transition* OR "green oath" OR "do no harm" OR "leave no one behind" OR just* OR equit* OR "raw material" OR "raw materials" OR mineral*.

⁵ Calculated using text query in NVivo for Mac. The following search strings were used: “do no”, “just transition”, “no one behind”, “no one is left behind”, “European Green Deal”.

Energy, 2021, p. 180), concerns over negative impacts are rarely expressed explicitly.

To quantify how the negative impacts from extractive activities are reflected in relation to raw materials, we identified all mentions of raw materials that either explicitly acknowledge the harms caused by extraction of raw materials, or explicitly acknowledge the European Green Deal as a driver of these harms through its demand for raw materials. As shown in Table 1 below, of the 4621 mentions of raw materials in the analysed documents, 150 (3.2 %) of these mentions explicitly refer to harms caused by the extraction of raw materials. However, of these 150 mentions, only eight (0.17 % of total mentions) explicitly refer to these harms as driven by the implementation of the European Green Deal.

The eight mentions that explicitly describe these harms as driven by the implementation of the European Green Deal are found in three of the 195 documents analysed in the study. One is made by the European Parliament in its resolution on the document ‘A new Circular Economy Action Plan For a cleaner and more competitive Europe’, where it recalls that climate and environmental impacts from extractive industries are among the consequences of digitalisation. A second mention is made by the European Commission in its ‘Strategic foresight report: twinning the green and digital transitions in the new geopolitical context’, which acknowledges that the mining necessary for undertaking these transitions raises environmental and ethical concerns. The remaining six mentions are all found in annex 8 of the Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023–2024 and linked to a single call for research projects examining the role of climate change foresight for primary and secondary raw materials supply. See Table 2 for an overview of these quotes.

Recognising the variety of types of documents analysed, it is worth noting here that calls for research projects under the Horizon Europe Work Programme are written for an audience and follow procedures that allow its authors to display a much greater degree of freedom of expression than documents intended to formalise norms or communicate official political standpoints of the European Union or one of its organizations. As such, it is every reason to question the degree to which the framing of the call for a single project reflects the dominant political European Green Deal discourse on raw materials, and to note that without the call for this one research project, only two mentions of raw materials in the 195 analysed documents would problematise the link between the implementation of the European Green Deal and harms caused by extraction of raw materials.

We conceptualise this lack of articulation of the role of the European Green Deal in driving negative impacts as a discursive silence. That is, something that remains unarticulated because it lies beyond what can be reasonably said and thought in dominant European Green Deal discourse. Increasing access to and security of supply of raw materials is the main emphasis of the European Green Deal discourse on raw materials, and the increased demand for raw materials caused by the implementation of the green transition is explicitly acknowledged. Recognition of the harms associated with extraction of raw materials is

explicitly acknowledged and implicitly underlies policies aimed at greening value chains, implementing procedures and frameworks for improved sustainability and social and environmental due diligence. Yet, there is almost no problematisation of how the design of the European Green Deal with its emphasis on continued green growth as a strategy for addressing the current climate and nature crisis is a driver of these harms, despite this seemingly being of concern when evaluating the ethical and environmental merits of the transition.

4.2. Representing the European Green Deal as a globally just and inclusive transition

In this section we explore how the discursive silence on the harms associated with extractive activities enables the representation of a globally just European Green Deal that brings about a ‘just transition’ that ‘do no harm’ and ‘leave no one behind’. To do so, we start by presenting the results of our analysis of the dominant discourse on how the European Green Deal aims to achieve a just and inclusive transition. We structure our presentation around three key questions: 1) what are the perceived threats to undertaking a just and inclusive transition in the context of the European Green Deal, 2) who will be impacted if the transition is not just and inclusive, and 3) how can the European Green Deal be designed to ensure just and inclusive outcomes?

As shown in Table 3 below, the answers to these questions lay out a coherent narrative that describes how implementing the European Green Deal may result in unjust outcomes, who these outcomes might impact, and how this can be avoided. Two characteristics of this narrative are particularly relevant for our purposes. Firstly, the narrative is fully self-contained. That is, there are no threats to undertaking a just and inclusive transition identified that are not resolved through the current design of the European Green Deal. Secondly, all elements have a strong geographic demarcation within the European Union. The threats identified are caused by structural changes within the European Union. Those at risk are companies, workers, citizens, and governments associated with specific industries. The solutions to address the threats against just and inclusive outcomes are explicitly targeted towards these actors within the European Union through among other the Just Transition Mechanism. As such, in this narrative there are no external impacts of the European Green Deal that must be addressed or accounted for to justify its representation as a just and inclusive transition.

This dominant narrative of threats, risks and solutions is reflected in, and supported by, the employment of the three rhetorical devices ‘just transition’, ‘do no harm’, and ‘leave no one behind’. Unlike the narrative on the just and inclusive transition, which is geographically demarcated to the territories of the European Union, these three rhetorical devices are all ‘geographically extensive’. That is, they are not intrinsically constrained in space. If the European Green Deal ‘do no harm’, it does no harm whether you live in Brussels, a coal-dependent mining community in Romania, or Indigenous people’s territories by the lithium mines on the Atacama salt flats in Chile. If it is a ‘just transition’, it is just whether you are an unemployed single mother in Berlin, an oilrig mechanic in the

Table 1

Overview of mentions of raw materials in the analysed documents that i) explicitly acknowledge the harms caused by extraction of raw materials, and ii) explicitly acknowledge the European Green Deal as a driver of these harms.

	Number of mentions	Number of documents
Explicit acknowledgement of harms caused by extraction of raw materials	150 explicit acknowledgements of harms out of a total 4621 mentions of the search words in the analysed documents (3,2 % of all mentions of the search words)	36 documents containing explicit acknowledgement of harms out of 195 total documents (18 % of all documents)
Explicit acknowledgement of the European Green Deal as driver of harms caused by extraction of raw materials	8 explicit acknowledgements of <u>the European Green Deal as a driver of harms</u> out of a total 4621 mentions of the search words in the analysed documents (0,17 % of all mentions of the search words)	3 documents containing explicit acknowledgement of the European Green Deal as a driver of harms out of 195 total documents (1,5 % of all documents)

Table 2

Overview of quotes in the analysed documents showing implicit recognition of harms, explicit recognition of harms, and explicit recognition of the role played by the European Green Deal in driving these harms.

Text segments with implicit recognition of the harms caused by extraction of raw materials
<p>“The EU <i>principles for sustainable raw materials</i> underline the importance of <i>sound environmental management and biodiversity protection, promote efficient energy use, support climate change mitigation and adaptation, and contribute to the resilience of indigenous people in the face of climate change effects</i>” (European Commission, European External Action Service, 2021, p. 10, emphasis added).</p> <p>“A <i>secure and sustainable supply</i> of raw materials for battery applications is one of the key challenges. Therefore, the EU and its Member States should <i>ensure a proper framework for a sustainable, environmentally neutral, and responsible sourcing</i>” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Energy, 2021 p. 180, emphasis added).</p> <p>“The digitalisation of the EU raw materials sector is a singular opportunity to enhance the resilience of European industrial supply chains, to <i>improve the environmental performance of the minerals sector and to increase transparency and dialogues with citizens and communities affected by mining activities</i>” (European Economic and Social Committee, 2020, p. 5, emphasis added).</p>
Text segments with explicit recognition of the harms caused by extraction of raw materials
<p>“The <i>enormous appetite for resources (energy, food and raw materials)</i> is putting extreme pressure on the planet, accounting for half of greenhouse gas emissions and more than 90 % of biodiversity loss and water stress” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, 2020, p. 1, emphasis added).</p> <p>“Although the Batteries Directive covers some of the environmental impacts related to the end-of-life stage of batteries, there are also <i>environmental risks</i> related to the other stages in the life cycle. Examples include <i>adverse impact related to the extraction of raw materials</i>” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Environment, 2020, p. 11, emphasis added).</p> <p>“In the context of rising prices for energy and raw materials, the EESC emphasizes that, <i>compared to the extraction process of raw materials, recycling entails significant reduction of energy and GHG emissions</i>” (European Economic and Social Committee, 2022a, p.6, emphasis added).</p>
Text segments with explicit recognition of the European Green Deal as a driver of harms caused by extraction of raw materials
<p>“<i>Mining and processing of the raw materials necessary for the transitions raises environmental and ethical concerns</i>” (European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2022, p. 3, emphasis added).</p> <p>“The European Parliament (...) recalls that <i>digitalisation also has considerable climate and environmental impacts</i>, such as growing energy demand, <i>raw material extraction</i>, and the generation of electronic waste” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 15, emphasis added).</p> <p>“Achieving <i>enhanced digitalisation and a low carbon society will involve a change in the type and quantity of the raw materials required by the economy</i> (...) Materials are likely to be extracted from increasingly lower grade ores and (...) this would involve a general <i>increase in the energy required to supply raw materials, as well as associated greenhouse gas emissions and changes in some other environmental impacts</i>” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2022, p. 78, emphasis added).</p>

North Sea, or a child-labourer in a copper mine in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The effect of this geographic extension is enhanced by the ambiguity and diversity of meaning that characterise all these terms.

Together, the discursive qualities of these devices enable flexible political communication that speak to several audiences at different geographic scales simultaneously. The geographic extension is resulting in the movement from *policies* aiming to ensure a just and inclusive transition *within* the territories of the European Union, to a *representation* of European Green Deal as a *globally* just transition. This extension of the scope of the ethical claims of the European Union is facilitated through these rhetorical devices and concurrent silence on the negative *beyond* Europe. If these negative impacts were made explicit and adequately quantified in policy discourse, it would hinder representations of the European Green Deal as a globally just and inclusive transition without addressing these impacts.

The centrality of these rhetorical devices in communication of the commitments to undertake a just and inclusive transition is made clear in the policy document ‘The European Green Deal’, which officially launched the initiative in 2019. This document includes its own subsection entitled ‘A green oath: ‘do no harm’’. The European Commission highlights that “all EU actions and policies should pull together to help the EU achieve a successful and *just transition* towards a sustainable future” (European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2019, p. 19, emphasis added); stresses its aim to ensure that all Green Deal initiatives “live up to a green oath to *‘do no harm’*” (European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2019, p. 19 emphasis added); and, underline that policies must “guide action in ensuring that *no one is left behind*” (European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2019, p. 4 emphasis added). Together, the three devices are mentioned a total of 1622 times, amounting to more than eight times per document, or four times for

every fifth mention of the “European Green Deal” (see Table 4 for a breakdown of these numbers).

The representation of the European Green Deal as a globally just transition, made possible by the silence on impacts of extractive activities and geographic extension of its ethical claims, is further supported by claims of positive outcomes on a global scale. This is exemplified in quotes such as this, from Frans Timmermans, executive vice-president of the European Commission: “we propose a green and inclusive transition to help improve people’s well-being and secure a healthy planet for generations to come” (Economic and Committee, Directorate-General for Communication, 2020, p. 16). Accompanying this type of statements is the framing of the European Green Deal as a vehicle for achieving the European Union’s global environmental commitments, linking the successful implementation of the European Green Deal to achievement of the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. Taken together, this representation of the European Green Deal as a globally just transition play an important role in justifying the European Union’s vision for how a green transition should be undertaken and what society it should engender.

5. Discussion: Justifying the European Green Deal, foreclosing dialogues, and ‘windows of opportunity’

As the previous sections have shown, there is a fundamental contradiction between the European Green Deal’s emphasis on a just and inclusive transition and its pursuit of continued green growth dependent on massive increases in extraction of raw materials. This contradiction is inherently geographical. The representation of the European Green Deal as a *globally* just and inclusive transition is made possible by the combination of policies intended to ensure just outcomes *within* the European Union and the silencing of negative impacts *beyond*

Table 3

Overview of dominant discourses on undertaking a just and inclusive transition in the analyzed European Green Deal policy documents.

Overview of dominant discourse on undertaking a just and inclusive transition in the analysed European Green Deal policy documents		
Analytical question	Summary of representation in dominant European Green Deal discourse	Example quotes
What are the threats to implementing the transition in a just and inclusive manner?	Reduced economic activity caused by shutting-down, down-scaling and restructuring fossil fuel industries and other carbon-intensive industries; loss of jobs and changing needs for expertise following green restructuring; increased energy prices for business and citizens; and, associated social challenges following these changes.	<p>“The transition will lead to significant structural changes in business models, skill requirements and relative prices” (European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2019, p. 16 emphasis added).</p> <p>“The transformation will pose a significant challenge to some territories. Climate neutrality will require a fundamental restructuring of their economies (...) Fossil fuel mining and exploration will face a significant decline and highly-greenhouse gas intensive activities will undergo a deep transformation. Regions and territories highly dependent on these activities will need to restructure their industries, ensure that new economic activities can keep the economic and social texture together and, provide the necessary training to the workers concerned to find new jobs” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, 2020, p. 17, emphasis added).</p>
Who are at risk of experiencing negative impacts from the transition?	People employed in carbon-intensive industries, down-stream, up-stream, or other industries impacted by restructuring of carbon-intensive industries; regions and municipalities losing revenue-streams by industrial restructuring; and, people, businesses, and governments with poor capacity to adapt to increased energy prices.	<p>“Transitioning to a climate-neutral economy (...) will be particularly demanding for those Member States which rely heavily on fossil fuels or greenhouse gas intensive industries (...) and which lack the financial means to adapt” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, 2020, p. 19, emphasis added).</p> <p>“In 2019, energy poverty affected up to 31 million people in the EU. This underlines the importance of shielding vulnerable groups from the price spike and ensuring a just transition towards climate neutrality” (Economic and Social Committee, 2022b, p. 114, emphasis added).</p>
How are these risks to be mitigated?	The Just Transition Mechanism will funnel allocated funds to regions, industries, businesses, and people at risk.	<p>“The policy framework to advance the just energy and climate transition targets regions, sectors and businesses with high GHG intensities or high dependency on the extraction of solid fossil fuels” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Energy, 2022, p. 10, emphasis added)</p> <p>“Support will (...) protect the citizens and workers most vulnerable to the transition, providing access to re-skilling programmes, jobs in new economic sectors, or energy-efficient housing (...) affordable solutions to those affected by carbon pricing policies, for example through public transport (European Commission, Secretariat-General, 2019, p. 16, emphasis added).</p>

Europe. This silence is made possible, in part, by the displacement of extraction from the areas in which the transition will take place and its beneficial outcomes will materialise to resource frontiers, primarily in the Global South, reflecting hegemonic power relations and global patterns of capital accumulation, poverty and uneven ecological exchange (Bebbington et al., 2018; Martinez-Alier, 2001; Smith, 2008; Sovacool et al., 2019; Sultana, 2022b). This highlights that transition efforts under the green growth paradigm cannot be extricated from the deeply uneven extractive relations that shape world trade, raising important questions about their ethical merits and ecological prospects.

Importantly, this representation of a globally just European Green Deal not only silences the contradiction between extraction and just and inclusive outcomes that formed the departure point for our paper; it also silences the historical and geographic context in which the expansion of extractive activities takes place. Primarily taking place in extractive

Table 4

Overview of occurrence of key rhetorical devices in the analysed policy documents.

Terms	Number of mentions
“Do no harm”/“do no significant harm”	771
“Just transition”	735
“Leave no one behind”/“no one is left behind”	116
“European Green Deal”	2072

frontiers with weak regulatory control, vulnerable ecosystems, in the territories of materially and politically marginalised communities, including Indigenous peoples and local communities (Acuna, 2015; Bebbington et al., 2018; Johnson, 2019), the extraction necessary to fuel the green growth aspirations of the European Green Deal is likely to exacerbate negative local impacts such as biodiversity loss (Luckeneder et al., 2021), pollution (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2020), health problems (Blanco et al., 2023), elite capture (Frederiksen and Himley, 2020), and loss of land rights social conflict, unrest, and displacement (Le Billon and Lujala, 2020; Martinez-Alier, 2001; Temper et al., 2015). Furthermore, in the Global South where the majority of the expansion of resource frontiers is expected to take place (Hool et al., 2023), these ‘green’ extractive practices will be layered on top of several hundred years of colonial relations that have contributed to current global inequalities (Andreucci and Zografos, 2022; Jerez et al., 2021; Mejia-Muñoz and Babidge, 2023). In sum, the costs of the green transition in Europe is paid by the people that has the least responsibility for the current environmental crises, and which have benefitted the least from the increase in material wealth that has accompanied the emergence of these crises. All the elements above influence how we evaluate the ethical merits of the European Green Deal but are effectively silenced through policy discourses representing a globally just and inclusive transition.

This silence has important implications for the future dialogues and design of policy interventions to address the climate and nature crisis. It

is in part expected that public policy documents such as those analysed here, written primarily to convince a variegated European audience, downplay negative impacts of proposed policies. This should not be taken to imply that the European Union is unconcerned about the international aspects of the European Green Deal. As part of their efforts to gain access to raw materials, the European Union also stress efforts to promote sound environmental management and sustainable extractive practices across value chains and reduce negative impacts from European consumption through for example its regulation on deforestation-free products (European Commission, 2023). We argue, however, that the almost complete silence on the role of the European Green Deal as a driver of negative social and ecological harms beyond the European Union identified in our analysis suggests a systematic misrepresentation. This misrepresentation hinders the level of policy coherence that will be necessary for a successful green transition (Ahlström and Sjøfjell, 2023; Häbel and Hakala, 2021), and shuts down political and public dialogue by justifying current design and foreclosing important conversations about the ethical merits of the European Green Deal and alternative visions for how a green transitions can be undertaken.

If the European Green Deal will do no harm, there is no need to discuss how negative impacts will be distributed across space or time or what measures can be put in place to ensure climate justice (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Sultana, 2022a). There is no need to question the assumptions, values, worldviews of green growth, technological optimism, and expansion of capitalist relations that underlie the current design of the European Green Deal (Dunlap and Laratte, 2022; Dunlap and Marin, 2022; Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Mastini et al., 2021). And, there is no need to explore alternative green transition imaginaries focused on climate, environmental and energy justice and degrowth. Importantly, these considerations are not restricted to the European Green Deal, but apply to similar initiatives and other green growth imaginaries coming to occupy increasingly central positions in efforts to combat climate change across the globe. While it is well beyond the scope of this paper to offer any informed assessment of how to weigh the different considerations underlying the design of the European Green Deal, we do suggest that this is a political dialogue with global implications that it is important to engage in. By shutting down conversations and silencing the tension between economic growth, a just transition and environmental objectives, these representations of the European Green Deal signal a fictitious resolution of thorny and difficult ethical and political dilemmas that should be at the forefront of global dialogues about solutions to the environmental crisis.

If left unresolved, this inherent tension in the current design of the European Green Deal will result in inconsistencies and logical contradictions that will be increasingly difficult to mould together in a coherent representation of the European Green Deal as a credible, just, and inclusive solution to the nature and climate crisis. The European Green Deal commits to 'do no harm' and 'leave no one behind', but the type of transition it aims to achieve will drive an increase in extractive activities with negative social and ecological impacts (Ali et al., 2017; Herrington, 2021; Nate et al., 2021). It commits to being 'just', but the negative impacts from these extractive activities will disproportionately impact the people that have contributed the least to the environmental crises the European Green Deal is purporting to address, while the economic growth it aims to bring about will take place in one of the wealthiest regions of the world (Jerez et al., 2021; Mejia-Muñoz and Babidge, 2023; Sovacool, 2019). The European Green Deal is the European Union's strategy for achieving its international environmental commitments such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, but these are explicitly global challenges that require global solutions (Moyer and Hedden, 2020; Savaresi, 2016). The achievement of a just, equitable and green transition within the European Union does little to meet these commitments if it is achieved by externalising negative social and ecological impacts (Eisenmenger et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020).

Over time, the gap between the rhetoric of a globally just and inclusive green transition and the harms caused by the implementation of the European Green Deal is likely to become more apparent. This may, we suggest, open a 'window of opportunity' (Rose et al., 2020) where the content of the ambitious rhetorical commitments to undertake a 'just transition' that 'do no harm' and 'leave no one behind' may be renegotiated for more just and inclusive outcomes. The content of these terms, and the practices associated with them, are continuously produced and reproduced through discursive practices by a multitude of actors across a multitude of sites (Fairclough, 2015, 2003). While this process of discursive maintenance and contestation is always ongoing, exposing the inconsistencies and contradictions in the logic underlying the current design of the European Green Deal, as we are attempting to contribute to with this paper, may provide an important impetus for change. Failure to adjust the design and implementation of the European Green Deal accordingly jeopardises its potential green and just outcomes and risks it ending up as the latest reiteration of colonial, hegemonic and exploitative relations between Europe and countries in the global South.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have taken as our starting point what we see as an underlying tension at the heart of the European Green Deal and similar initiatives across the globe. Despite emphasising the importance of just and inclusive outcomes, their implementation relies on massive extraction of raw materials for building a low-carbon economy and continued green growth. Analysing 195 policy papers from the European Union, we identify a hegemonic discourse that effectively silences the role played by the European Green Deal in driving negative social and ecological impacts, primarily in the Global South, that enable the presentation of the European Green Deal as a globally 'just transition' that 'do no harm' and 'leaves no one behind'. This representation obscures not only the full costs of the proposed transition policies, but also how these intersect with historic patterns of inequality and injustice in ways that shift the costs of fuelling the production of a 'green' Europe to politically and materially marginalised resource frontiers in the Global South and risks reproducing colonial patterns of resource extraction. In so doing, it serves to justify the current design of the European Green Deal, shutting down conversations about its underlying assumptions of green growth and technological optimism and foreclosing dialogues about alternative ways to undertake low-carbon transitions.

While our analysis has focused on the European Green Deal, these findings hold important insights for wider debates about climate change policies and transition imaginaries. Strategies for addressing the current environmental crisis around the world are increasingly formulated as comprehensive packages intended to bring about sweeping social and economic reform through 'green' economic growth and technological innovation. As such, understanding the full ecological and social impacts of these policies are of paramount importance. Downplaying negative impacts, and in particular those located far from the centres of power, is an understandable strategy for building political coalitions and public support for these policies. However, there is a real risk that the entrenchment of green growth imaginaries obfuscates the existence of very real trade-offs that should be at the forefront of dialogues about a just and inclusive green transition. Given that there are limits to growth (Meadows et al., 1972), there is a need to discuss how much growth is needed, and how this growth and its costs should be distributed. Failing to address this tension jeopardizes the intended positive environmental outcomes and risks undermining the narrative of a just and inclusive transition that has contributed to recent enthusiasm for the European Green Deal and similar transition initiatives.

Raising awareness of how this tension is silenced in policy discourses and the contradictions and inconsistencies this is resulting in, as we are attempting to contribute to with this paper, is an important first step for shifting transition dialogues towards engaging with these thorny ethical

and political dilemmas at the heart of green transition initiatives. Further research could contribute to strengthen this dialogue by addressing, at least, three key knowledge gaps. Firstly, there is a need to improve understanding of how the overarching tensions identified in this paper are articulated and implemented in specific laws and policies, including in the countries most impacted by the extractive activities fuelling global decarbonisation efforts. Here, the identification of discursive and narrative resources enabling the combination of political and public support for ambitious environmental policies with careful attention to the limits of growth, reduction of negative impacts and global solidarity would be of particular interest. Secondly, there is a need to increase our knowledge of the dynamics and impacts, both social and ecological, of the rapid expansion of resource frontiers for green transition policies. Thirdly, there is a need to assess the effectiveness of the host of policies aiming to reduce the environmental and social impacts of these transition policies through among other the greening of value chains, development of new renewable materials and recycling. This could include identifying how the European Union may support development of fair governance for resource extraction in third countries. Addressing these knowledge gaps will be key for establishing a solid foundation for a fact-based dialogue about how we can design just and inclusive transition policies that address the current environmental crisis while reducing global inequalities.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Håkon da Silva Hyldmo: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ståle Angen Rye:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Diana Vela-Almeida:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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Data availability

We have shared our data as [supplementary material](#).

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