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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Toward a global eco-social policy? The OECD and Green Keynesianism

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ABSTRACT

While environmental and social problems transcend national borders, eco-social policy research has predominantly focused on European nation-states and the European Union at the transnational level. Acknowledging the influence of international organizations (IOs) in global policy debates, this article expands empirical eco-social policy research to include the level of IOs, with a particular focus on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). By examining different ideational accounts within the OECD, including the *New Approaches to Economic Challenges* initiative, the *Inequalities-Environment Nexus*, and the *OECD Better Life Initiative*, we explore the position the OECD adopts on eco-social policy and the global repercussions and transformative potential this entails. The organization's ideational accounts reject a neoclassical economic interpretation of eco-social policy and instead promote a Green Keynesianism paradigm that values government intervention, social protection, and social investment as means to facilitate a green transition. However, these approaches rely on capitalist patterns of productivism and full employment inherent in existing welfare state regimes, which perpetuate processes of externalization, even under supposedly green conditions. Acknowledging ongoing contestation processes, we suggest that this shift toward Green Keynesianism historically follows the dialectical relationship between Keynesianism (embedded liberalism) and the neoliberal monetarist paradigm, yet it also risks reproducing unequal exchange relations between the Global South and the Global North, thereby falling short of eco-social justice claims at the global level.

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Introduction

It is evident that ecological and social problems transcend national borders. Climate change, stratospheric ozone and air pollution, biodiversity loss, desertification, hazardous-waste trading, and marine-ecosystem conservation are inherently transnational issues that require global coordination (O'Neill 2009). Social problems, such as poverty and inequality, are often addressed through national data and welfare states, but they are closely intertwined with global phenomena, such as climate change, which exacerbates these conditions (Hallegatte et al. 2016). Moreover, particularly in relation to the Global South, social problems are closely tied to patterns of global trade. The significant economic growth in the Global North, which has created a high level of welfare in these countries, has relied heavily on the exploitation of resources and labor from the Global South, thereby undermining potential welfare advancement in the latter (Hickel et al. 2022). Additionally, while ecological and social problems clearly transcend national borders, they are inherently interconnected. Generally, the more social needs a state fulfills, the more likely it is to transgress planetary boundaries. Wealthy nations often meet most social needs but exceed ecological thresholds, whereas some low-income countries barely transgress planetary boundaries but struggle to fulfill various social needs (Fanning et al. 2021).

Accordingly, there are clear transnational and global dimensions related to the integrative practice of addressing ecological and social problems simultaneously. In recent years, research on sustainable

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welfare and eco-social policy research has emerged, explicitly examining this relationship (Fritz and Lee 2023; Gough 2017). However, the analytical focus has largely remained at the national and comparative level in both quantitative and qualitative studies (e.g., Hirvilammi et al. 2023; Zimmermann and Graziano 2020). While this focus is undoubtedly valuable for understanding and advocating for the integration of environmental and social policies within the polity of the nation-state, which ultimately bears crucial responsibility for policy implementation, the literature risks perpetuating methodological nationalism (Greer, Elliott, and Oliver 2020). This situation may lead to overlooking and neglecting global actors and repercussions that could either drive or hinder eco-social policy integration, as well as fail to consider the global implications of such integration if implemented in a specific way within nation-states (Cigna et al. 2023; Laruffa and Nullmeier 2025; Schulze Waltrup, Moore, and Paulsen 2023). Meanwhile, it is evident that global actors, such as international organizations (IOs), have a significant impact on national policymaking worldwide (Armingeon and Beyeler 2004; Orenstein 2008; Wahlström and Nordin 2024).

Over the past few decades, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has emerged as a central global policy actor. Initially focused on a small group of high-income countries and primarily addressing economic policy issues, the OECD has substantially broadened its program to include environmental and social policy concerns, among others. This expansion has resulted in more nuanced and diversified policy advice, but research has also identified contradictory messages from different organizational units within the OECD, while the OECD overall often reverts to neoliberal ideas (Deacon 2007; Leimgruber and Schmelzer 2017). Given the OECD's reputation as a reliable global policy adviser,¹ even beyond its relatively small but growing membership, it is essential to understand the organization's position and role in integrating social and environmental concerns. The OECD's expected ideational impact includes, for instance, influencing the conceptual development of national eco-social policies and informing their justification and transformative potential for addressing climate change-induced global social inequalities.

Previous research has demonstrated that the OECD's overall discourse on eco-social policy contains contradictory elements that ultimately serve to stabilize the existing capitalist mode of production with green conditionalities (Schulze Waltrup 2025a). This article delves deeper into the internal knowledge production and specificities of ideational accounts and their associated organizational units, which are at the forefront of the OECD's emerging eco-social policy agenda. We do this to explore more specifically the transformative potential and global repercussions of these OECD ideational accounts, which are considered to promote a relatively progressive agenda within the OECD. For example, we examine to what extent the OECD's eco-social policy paradigm of Green Keynesianism, as advanced by these ideational accounts, reproduces unequal exchange relationships between the Global North and South, thereby accelerating "green colonialism."

Analytically, we employ the concept of "ideational accounts" as coherent sets of problem definitions and proposed solutions to address these problems. As the OECD is a knowledge-based actor without regulatory or financial competencies in international relations, we focus on the OECD's "meditative" mode of regulation (Mahon 2015), which can be characterized as discussions and discourses among experts on the best way to approach various issues (Jacobsson 2006, 208). Focusing on "ideational accounts" emphasizes the OECD's impact on emerging (national) eco-social policies by conceptualizing common narratives to identify and tackle policy problems, thereby providing a spectrum of legitimate thinking patterns about how and what policies are enacted by member states. We also use the term "ideational accounts" in a broader sense, as it can empirically encompass prominent policy initiatives as well as specific documents that are not necessarily linked to larger OECD initiatives, but reflect the organization's routine working program. More specifically, our analysis concentrates on the eco-social paradigm embedded in the ideational accounts of the *New Approaches to Economic Challenges* initiative, the *Inequalities-Environment Nexus*, and the *OECD Better Life Initiative*.

The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews literature on sustainable welfare and eco-social policy, with a particular focus on the eco-social policy paradigms of Green Economy, Green Keynesianism, and Degrowth, which serve as the analytical framework of this article (Buch-Hansen and Carstensen 2021; Schulze Waltrup 2025b). The third section introduces the OECD in the context of global governance and briefly reviews its involvement in environmental and social policy. The

fourth section outlines the methodological approach, which applies qualitative content analysis. The fifth section provides case descriptions of the OECD's ideational accounts, which are compared to the paradigms of Green Economy, Green Keynesianism, and Degrowth in the sixth section. The seventh section critically contextualizes the identified ideational accounts' prescription of Green Keynesianism within the global governance system, framing it as a move toward green embedded liberalism that risks reproducing unequal exchange relations and, consequently, falling short of achieving eco-social justice at the global level.

Sustainable welfare and eco-social policy paradigms

The research field of sustainable welfare and eco-social policy, which draws on and combines insights from the traditions of social policy research and ecological economics, addresses the problem that environmental and social policy research and practice have traditionally been siloed, with severe consequences for the eco-social nexus (Büchs and Koch 2017; Gough 2017). Sustainable welfare criticizes the inherent productivism and the externalization of negative impacts associated with welfare-state regimes, which have profound ecological and climate-change implications and are based on the exploitation of the Global South (Hickel et al. 2022). Although these regimes have created significant prosperity in the Global North, this has come at the cost of undermining the Earth system's capacity to sustain human life in the long term (Fanning et al. 2021).

Various policy perspectives address this tension between natural and welfare systems in differing and sometimes opposing ways, while also highlighting potential for synergies between environmental and social policy (Wilder, Rosalle, and Bishop 2024). Various frameworks have been proposed in the literature on eco-social policy to assess policy actors and their stances (e.g., Cigna et al. 2023; Cotta 2025; Mandelli 2022). However, these constructs do not necessarily distinguish between different degrees of the transformative potential of eco-social policies, but can be applied to any perspective, regardless of whether it is part of a green growth or a degrowth agenda. While this universality has advantages, we aim to focus on these different degrees of transformative potential and potential paradigmatic changes within eco-social policy. To this end, we draw on the typology developed by Schulze Waltrup (2025b), which differentiates between eco-social policy paradigms based on their transformative potential, with a focus on Green Economy, Green Keynesianism, and Degrowth.² Additionally, we draw on Buch-Hansen and Carstensen (2021) to distinguish between different magnitudes of policy change. From this perspective, we highlight that Green Economy and Green Keynesianism represent third-order policy-paradigm changes that operate within a capitalist system but differ when it comes to the role of government in the transition to green growth (see Hall 1993 on third-order policy-paradigm change).³ In contrast, the eco-social policy paradigm of Degrowth operates at a fourth-order level, indicating a system change and, therefore, a transformative perspective (Buch-Hansen and Carstensen 2021). Identifying these differences between paradigms is crucial, even when they are part of the same capitalist system, as in the case of Green Economy and Green Keynesianism, because both paradigms have distinct implications for decommodification, which is essential in the discussion of conceiving pathways to post-productivist eco-welfare states (Dukelow and Murphy 2022). Furthermore, both capitalist paradigms are rooted in a history of dialectical relationships in global governance and within the OECD.

The Green Economy is the eco-social policy paradigm that relies most heavily on market-based solutions, emphasizing the capacity of private actors to guide the low-carbon transition. It empowers such individuals and incentivizes them to self-regulate toward sustainable practices rather than imposing comprehensive controls (Newell and Paterson 2010). The paradigm promotes the economic growth regime, aiming to make it compliant with ecological protection (on the historical development of economic growth regimes, see Hall 2020; Hassel and Palier 2025). The underlying assumption is that traditional welfare-state operations, which depend on economic growth, could continue if economic growth came without ecological degradation. Consequently, traditional welfare-state operations are expected to address social issues through the greening of economic growth, with private actors taking a leading role within the broader policy framework. In conceptualizing the Green Economy as a policy paradigm, we draw a parallel with the monetarist paradigm (Hall 1993). Both paradigms closely align with the idea of a self-regulating market, in which the government should mostly only intervene to

enforce regulations that uphold the market order, thereby enabling self-regulating practices among private actors. However, whereas monetarism has neglected structural considerations for ecological protection, the Green Economy incorporates such considerations into its market logic. Due to its focus on increasing the scope of private actors, the Green Economy rather drives commodification processes and conceives of a limited role for the welfare state in the transition to green growth.

While Green Keynesianism also adheres to the green economic growth regime, it rejects the Green Economy's focus on expanding the role of private actors, instead calling for greater government intervention. Green Keynesianism combines the welfare-state principles of Keynesianism with ecological protection objectives (Tienhaara 2018). Keynesianism has been described as a key policy paradigm during the post-World War II era of welfare-state expansion in the Global North (Hall 1993), characterized by comprehensive social insurance, full employment achieved through fiscal stimulus, and progressive taxation, with an overall appreciation of government intervention (Hemerijck 2018). Green Keynesianism builds on this, emphasizing greater appreciation for public investments, regulatory policies, and interventionist measures that steer industries and capital toward reducing environmental impacts. This posture entails empowering actors involved in green technological innovation, social protection, and social investment, facilitating a just transition to a low-carbon economy (Custers 2010; Eskelinen 2015; Tienhaara 2018), which is also promoted through the concept of an "entrepreneurial state" (Goldstein and Tyfield 2018; Mazzucato 2014). Overall, Green Keynesianism embodies an eco-social policy paradigm that explicitly aims to integrate ecological and social objectives by promoting inclusive green growth.

Within the given system, and compared to Green Economy, Green Keynesianism may appear relatively progressive due to its shift toward decommodification, government intervention, and heightened awareness of potentially conflicting relationships between environmental and social policy. However, the system-transformative consequences of Green Keynesianism are modest. It relies on capitalist patterns of productivism inherent in existing welfare-state regimes, reproducing growth-driven consumption and production patterns, albeit with green conditionalities (Schulze Waltrup 2025b). From a global perspective, Green Keynesianism also risks perpetuating unequal exchange relations between the Global South and the North, as it relies on raw materials often sourced from the Global South to develop green technologies in the transition to a global low-carbon economy. This approach could potentially drive a form of "green colonialism" (Lang, Manahan, and Bringel 2024).

While economic growth remains crucial for Green Keynesianism, Degrowth explicitly rejects it as a guiding policy principle. It argues that, on empirical grounds, it is unlikely that decoupling economic growth from greenhouse-gas emissions and resource throughput can be achieved comprehensively enough to comply with planetary boundaries within the necessary time frame (Hickel and Kallis 2020). While Green Keynesianism does not promote the systematic downscaling of consumption and production patterns, Degrowth does (at least in the Global North), when considering necessary reductions of emissions and material production to reach the Earth system's safe operating space. While this downscaling may involve declines in gross domestic product (GDP), Degrowth promotes a transformation that aims to increase well-being and fulfillment of human needs during this process. The shift involves transitioning to a convivial understanding of well-being, emphasizing a profound redistribution of financial and natural resources from wealthier to poorer people, and creating an economy centered on caring and sharing practices, rather than the accumulation of money (Büchs and Koch 2017; Cosme, Santos, and O'Neill 2017). Degrowth advocates propose various policies and practices, including community and local currencies, reduced work time, job guarantees, universal basic income, and ceilings on wealth, income, consumption, and production (Bärnthaler and Gough 2023; Fuchs et al. 2021). This political program also includes regulation of international trade and capital movements to encourage local production and consumption, as well as a profound decommodification of nature and labor (for a review, see Cosme, Santos, and O'Neill 2017).

The OECD in global governance, social, and environmental policy

The OECD is a soft power organization within the global governance system, relying heavily on its expert authority to influence and shape the agendas, preferences, and ideas of its member states (Leimgruber and Schmelzer 2017; Mahon and McBride 2009). Although the OECD cannot enforce

laws or allocate financial resources to ensure adherence to its policies, research has emphasized the organization's capacity to influence nation-state practices through its authority and the expertise of the ideas it promotes (Martens and Jakobi 2010; Robertson 2022). Accordingly, the OECD's contribution to global governance and the shaping of nation-state practices relies on "inquisitive" and "meditative" modes of regulation (Jacobsson 2006; Mahon 2015). Inquisitive regulation entails the surveillance or monitoring of member states' activities, whereby member states are subject to peer evaluation and must allow others to scrutinize and critically assess their policies. Meditative activities are primarily discussions and discourses among experts on potential policy best practices (Jacobsson 2006, 208), often resulting in the creation of shared benchmarks, concepts and language, narratives, and common tools to assess policies (Woodward 2009, 66). The ideational accounts analyzed in this article resemble this meditative mode of regulation.

For decades, there have been vivid discussions within the OECD regarding social policy, including the extent to which (de-)commodification and welfare-state retrenchment or expansion are desirable for achieving synergistic economic performances. These debates span various social policy fields, including education, health, labor market, and activation policies (Deacon 2007). Social investment and inclusive growth are prominent social policy frameworks that the OECD has promoted (Deeming 2021). Social investment emerged in the 1990s to challenge welfare-state retrenchment, acknowledging the productive role of social policy in economic development and human-capital growth (Jenson 2010). The inclusive growth framework, established in 2012, emphasizes social protection, equity, and job quality and considers the distributional impacts of policies and multidimensional well-being (Mahon 2019).

Concerning environmental policy, the OECD began addressing ecological issues relatively early, compared to other IOs, in the 1960s (Borowy 2016). Rejecting unconditional growth, the OECD's environmental units have a history of advocating for economic growth that incorporates ecological dimensions (Long 2000, 121), culminating in the green growth strategy launched in 2011 (OECD 2011a). This entails integrating environmental concerns into other areas, such as trade and energy, through market-based measures (Barde 2007, 38). Furthermore, the OECD conceptualized the polluter pays principle, which opposes government subsidies for pollution abatement to avoid distorting free trade (Bernstein 2001, 51). Earlier research indicated that environmental issues often took a backseat to economic concerns, with a tendency to prioritize economic issues in environmental reviews, but less success in integrating ecological issues into economic reviews (Lehtonen 2007).

A crucial reference point for these debates in environmental and social policy has always been the degree of state intervention and decommodification, which was shaped by a dualism between neo-classical economic interpretations of environmental and social policy and more heterodox interpretations that favored government intervention. We build on this history by referencing the Green Economy and Green Keynesianism paradigms, which also embody this dualism.

Methodological approach

To analyze the OECD's ideational accounts from an eco-social policy perspective, we employ qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2021) of publicly available documents. Based on a search through the OECD's electronic library, we identified documents that explicitly address the sustainable welfare and eco-social policy debate.⁴ The search was based on key terms, such as green growth, poverty, climate change, environment, and inequality. Often, documents that referenced key eco-social policy notions cited other documents, which were then scrutinized as well. In this article, we focus on key publications that prominently call for breaking down policy silos. Furthermore, our analysis emphasizes documents that explicitly incorporate expertise from both the green growth and inclusive growth streams within the OECD and thus reflect an integrative approach from the outset. Accordingly, we explicitly focus on OECD documents that most clearly embody eco-social policy integration. Although these documents do not explicitly use the term "eco-social policy," they meet Mandelli's (2022) criterion for eco-social policy by explicitly aiming to integrate environmental and social policy objectives, transforming tradeoffs between these fields into synergies.

To provide case descriptions of the different ideational accounts that embody eco-social policy integration in the OECD, we focus on a specific set of flagship publications that represent these

ideational accounts (OECD 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021). In analyzing these reports, we applied a combined procedure of Mayring's (2021) techniques of summarizing and structuring to create case descriptions of the different ideational accounts, with a focus on their eco-social policy content. The goal of summarizing was to express the essential content of the material in a condensed form, while structuring pertained to the extraction of specific aspects from the material based on the eco-social policy typology developed by Schulze Waltrup (2025b) with emphasis on the eco-social policy paradigms of Green Economy, Green Keynesianism, and Degrowth. The typology guided our deductive coding approach. For example, we created the code "Green Keynesianism Entrepreneurial State" when we found an explicit reference to this concept in the data. While our approach was primarily deductive, we remained open to the OECD's own understanding of the applied concepts.

The OECD's ideational accounts of eco-social policy integration

New Approaches to Economic Challenges

The OECD launched *New Approaches to Economic Challenges* (NAEC) in 2012 as a reflection process to revise contemporary economic analysis based on lessons learned from the 2007–2008 financial crisis. At the organizational level, NAEC was attached to the office of the then Secretary-General Angel Gurría, and its primary objective was to organize public workshops and drive a "comprehensive organization-wide reflection process" (OECD 2015, 3). Overall, this undertaking spoke to the "revision of the OECD's analytical frameworks as well as a renewal and strengthening of its policy instruments and tools" (OECD 2015, 3), with a connected objective to "move beyond a silo-approach to policy" (OECD 2015, 3), which has been predominant in the OECD within its different directorates. In terms of governance, the idea was that NAEC would develop into a governance platform that coordinates horizontal collaborations within the OECD and, accordingly, steer the development of a "consistent whole-of-organization view" (OECD 2015, 58) while also overcoming its siloed approach.

NAEC's economic narrative poses a challenge to the OECD's work of previous decades. Considering environmental and social challenges, it advocates greater government intervention, abandoning the focus on unconditional growth, and steering the market toward serving environmental and social needs rather than the needs of financial capital or the "free market." The integration of environmental and social goals lies at the core of NAEC's policy conceptions (OECD 2020, 27). Therefore, we consider the initiative to be an ideational account of eco-social policy. While NAEC has made significant efforts to drive policy shifts within the OECD, it has faced resistance within the organization. Upon assuming office in 2021, Secretary-General Mathias Cormann⁵ promptly downgraded NAEC's status and organizational capacity. He attached NAEC to the Economics Department, an organizational unit that predominantly adheres to traditional concepts of economic policymaking that NAEC largely criticizes. Furthermore, Cormann reduced the team to a single individual and terminated the public character of NAEC's seminars, triggering a public outcry among economists (Forum New Economy 2022). We will reflect on this in the conclusion.

The Inequalities-Environment Nexus

The *Inequalities-Environment Nexus* (IEN) is a policy document that represents an explicit merger of environmental and social streams at the organizational level. The working team behind the report consisted of staff from the green growth and inclusive growth streams and was a collaboration between the OECD's Center on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability, and Equal Opportunity and the Environment Directorate (OECD 2021). This merging of teams is also why we consider IEN to represent an ideational account of eco-social policy. The IEN focuses on inequality in the context of environmental and social policy. First, the OECD emphasizes how the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately affect vulnerable social groups. Second, it shows how certain environmental policy measures, aimed at mitigating such degradation and climate change in the first place, may, depending on their policy design, also exacerbate social inequalities. Based on this problem diagnosis, IEN promotes an integrated policy approach, consisting of four pillars (OECD 2021, 4):

(1) mitigating the potential regressive effects of economic instruments used to combat climate change, (2) emphasizing the importance of social investment to improve workers' skills in response to labor reallocation, (3) providing compensation to regions that might be disadvantaged by a low-carbon transition, including measures for social protection and social dialogue, and (4) overcoming ministry silos at the institutional level to integrate policies effectively.

The OECD Better Life Initiative and the well-being framework

The OECD launched its well-being framework as part of the *OECD Better Life Initiative* in 2011, accompanied by regular “How’s Life” reports (Durand 2015; OECD 2011b). Generally, the assumption of the initiative is that well-being is multidimensional and, therefore, policymakers need to use different metrics to account for social improvements, thereby overcoming the often-exclusive focus on GDP growth. The framework consists of four overarching elements (Boarini and D’Ercole 2013): it (1) focuses on individuals and households, examining their characteristics and interactions within their communities; (2) goes beyond economic indicators, such as GDP, to assess well-being as a complex and multidimensional concept; (3) pays attention to how well-being is distributed across the population, rather than just focusing on national averages; (4) evaluates both present and future well-being, taking into account essential resources available today that could contribute to long-term well-being. Furthermore, the framework examines 11 dimensions considered universally important: income and wealth, jobs and earnings, housing, health, education, work-life balance, civic engagement, social connections, environmental conditions, personal security, and subjective well-being. On an organizational level, the well-being framework is closely connected to the OECD Center on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability, and Equal Opportunity. While the multidimensionality of the framework reflects potential for eco-social policy integration from the outset, the report that applies this lens explicitly to climate policy (see *Accelerating Climate Action: Refocusing Policies Through a Well-Being Lens*) (OECD 2019) was produced as part of the working program of the Environmental Policy Committee.

Toward Green Keynesianism while rejecting Green Economy and Degrowth

In this section, we compare the three ideational accounts to the Green Economy, Green Keynesianism, and Degrowth paradigms. The Green Economy paradigm assumes that greening economic growth will allow traditional welfare-state operations, which depend on economic growth, to continue unchanged. In contrast, Green Keynesianism, while also valuing economic growth as a basis for redistribution, is more aware of potential conflicts between environmental and social policies. Specifically, it considers how certain environmental policies might exacerbate social inequalities or how traditional social policy approaches might harm the environment. This awareness is also evident in the OECD’s ideational accounts. They highlight potential regressive effects of climate-mitigation policies, for example, in housing (OECD 2019, 112) and carbon pricing, placing relatively higher burdens on low-income households (OECD 2021, 3). The IEN, in particular, focuses on socioecological inequalities. It acknowledges that ecological degradation disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, emphasizing that this is particularly true for air pollution, as low-income households struggle to afford adaptation measures that can significantly affect the development of children and the health of the elderly (OECD 2021, 15). Moreover, it highlights that climate change disproportionately affects outdoor workers and rural areas, exacerbating urban-rural divides (OECD 2021, 3). Furthermore, it underscores how certain environmental measures benefit homeowners over tenants, such as subsidies for solar panels (OECD 2021, 3). The well-being framework also provides evidence on the relationship between inequality and environmental and social policy, for example, regarding housing and transportation (OECD 2019, 100f., 135ff.).

By recognizing these interconnections and tensions across policy fields, the ideational accounts also align with Green Keynesianism’s focus on compensation policies, encompassing both social protection and investment approaches (OECD 2019, 2021). These interventions include “transfer payments, revenue recycling and tax swapping, sometimes with revenues earmarked for social spending” (OECD 2021, 39). Overall, IEN highlights the important role of “accompanying social policies...in support

of the green transition” (OECD 2021, 36). This emphasis indicates that the Green Keynesian idea of a “just transition of ecological modernisation” (Kreinin 2020) is prominent. According to IEN, this approach would also include “social dialogue, social capital investments, social protection, [and] skills and education investments” (OECD 2021, 4), which is connected to the notion of “inclusive green growth” with a focus on “well-targeted income support measures, and upgrading skills to facilitate labour reallocation” (OECD 2021, 4).

In terms of ideas about self-regulating markets and government intervention, NAEC explicitly criticizes neoclassical economic ideas closely associated with the Green Economy paradigm. These ideas have had a profound impact on policymaking within the OECD, particularly since the 1980s, by promoting self-regulating markets through deregulation, privatization, and liberalization (Schmelzer 2016):

It would be surprising if it were just coincidence that so many deep problems have occurred at the same time. At the very least they surely demand that we seek to understand not just their individual causes but their interrelationships. And in doing so that we examine the nature of the economic system and economic policies from which they have arisen – or at least which have not prevented them (OECD 2020, 13).

Consequently, NAEC, like Green Keynesianism, promotes a government that actively steers market operations: “Correcting market failures’ will not be sufficient; markets can also be ‘shaped’ in pursuit of publicly determined goals” (OECD 2020, 25). Furthermore, NAEC explicitly promotes the idea of an entrepreneurial state that follows an interventionist agenda to shape markets: “states must become more entrepreneurial, seeking to shape markets and steer the process of economic change, not simply correct market failures” (OECD 2020, 29f.). Generally, NAEC promotes a more active fiscal policy, especially when monetary policy has been exhausted, as well as greater public investment, which is seen as mobilizing rather than deterring private investments (OECD 2020, 23f.). The IEN also states that public investments need to be steered toward ecological protection: “public demand can be geared towards supporting green industrial regeneration, green infrastructure development and supporting local job creation” (OECD 2021, 47). Moreover, IEN highlights the need for institutional change: “institutional mechanisms can support the mainstreaming of environmental and equity considerations in policy-making and budgeting across ministries and levels of government” (OECD 2021, 4).

The well-being framework complements these arguments by discussing synergies between environmental and social policy fields and how, for example, changes in agricultural practices could benefit full employment and the ecology. The framework proposes increasing access to public transportation, which implies investing in labor-intensive support for public transportation infrastructure (OECD 2019, 135ff.). Other synergies are discussed concerning the interconnection of ecological protection and public health (OECD 2019, 182). Moreover, like the other ideational accounts, the framework stresses the importance of promoting “active labour management programmes and revenue recycling” (OECD 2019, 75) while “avoid[ing] lock-in of carbon intensive technologies” (OECD 2019, 14).

In summary, when contrasted with the eco-social policy paradigms of Green Economy and Green Keynesianism, the OECD’s ideational accounts analyzed here prominently reflect Green Keynesianism, including criticism of the neoclassical economic conceptions that underpin the Green Economy paradigm. The ideational accounts align with Green Keynesianism’s focus on mitigating the negative social impacts of certain ecological protection measures through social protection and integrating environmental considerations into the operations of the welfare state, while valuing public spending, full employment, and green, inclusive economic growth. Additionally, they advocate for government intervention to guide the market toward technological innovation and the fulfillment of ecological and social needs, thereby criticizing the concept of a self-regulating market, which is more closely aligned with the Green Economy paradigm. Furthermore, this analysis suggests that the key interface for eco-social policy creation within the OECD lies between the Center on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity and the Environment Directorate. The IEN emerged as an explicit outcome of merging inclusive and green growth streams. Additionally, the well-being framework associated with the Center on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity was explicitly applied by the Environment Directorate (OECD 2019).

Elements of Degrowth?

To a certain degree, the ideational accounts also entail Degrowth ideas. However, these elements are not utilized to abandon the notion of economic growth, but rather redefine its value. Therefore, the Degrowth perspective can only be considered marginal, as the OECD picks up some notions (in particular critical remarks on GDP) and then applies these arguments to promote “inclusive green growth” (OECD 2021) or “beyond growth” (OECD 2020) perspectives. Specifically, the well-being framework and NAEC criticize the dominant focus on GDP in national policymaking, highlighting that GDP disregards the distribution of income in society, care work, and well-being factors that are independent of material conditions, and that economic growth is associated with air pollution (OECD 2019, 25). While Degrowth proponents use this criticism to promote a policy agenda that explicitly rejects economic growth, the OECD’s ideational accounts use it to reconfigure the meaning and importance of economic growth. As NAEC puts it: “These developments do not mean that economic growth should be abandoned as a goal of economic policy. Rather, they force attention to the form of economic growth which a country experiences and aims to achieve” (OECD 2020, 17). Similarly, the well-being framework suggests that policymaking should be directed toward “the quality of economic growth and its well-being outcomes, rather than just the magnitude of that growth” (OECD 2019, 26), which would involve “includ[ing] multiple well-being dimensions” (OECD 2019, 28).

NAEC also highlights the potential of some policy ideas that are often part of a Degrowth policy agenda. For example, the unit emphasizes “the potential of reducing working hours to capture the gains of higher productivity in improved well-being, rather than simply higher consumption” (OECD 2020, 29). Furthermore, NAEC briefly refers to universal basic services, universal basic income, and job guarantees (OECD 2020, 29). However, these ideas are not systematically explored; they are mainly referenced in a broad sense and, therefore, remain at the margins of the OECD’s policy discourse.

Global governance, Green Keynesianism, and green colonialism

Our analysis shows that the OECD’s eco-social policy ideational accounts resemble Green Keynesianism, while the Degrowth paradigm remains peripheral. In this section, we first contextualize the emergence of Green Keynesianism within the global governance system and then offer a critical perspective, suggesting that it risks reinforcing and driving green colonialism and associated unequal exchange relations.

From a historical perspective, we suggest that Green Keynesianism is a crucial contemporary development within the global governance system, entailing similarities with “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie 1982). Embedded liberalism emerged after World War II and established a comprehensive system of welfare-state services in the Global North, closely linked to the Keynesian paradigm (Atzmüller et al. 2019; Hemerijck 2018). Like Green Keynesianism, embedded liberalism centered on the idea that governments should control the economy because “the private economy as a whole was perceived as inherently unstable and incapable of delivering socially optimal outcomes” (Blyth 2002, 5). Nevertheless, neoliberal forces targeted embedded liberalism in the 1980s and promoted the creation of a self-regulating market order based on deregulation, privatization, and liberalization, often labeled the monetarist paradigm. This framework diminished the interventionist space of the government (Blyth 2002; Hall 1993). As suggested, the neoliberal paradigm resembles the Green Economy paradigm in eco-social policy debates. However, this neoliberal policy paradigm accelerated ecological and social crises (Burawoy 2015) and, in doing so, largely shaped the policy context to which Green Keynesianism responds today.

We suggest that the shift toward Green Keynesianism is a counter-response to the neoliberal approach of deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization. It aims to mitigate the negative outcomes created by this policy perspective while still relying on certain capitalist dynamics. Consequently, we interpret the shift to Green Keynesianism as a move toward green embedded liberalism, which represents a “new” policy perspective. The reference point of this perspective is the dialectical relationship between the Keynesian paradigm of embedded liberalism and the neoliberal paradigm of monetarism, with the added objective of ecological protection (on green embedded liberalism, see also Schulze Waltrup 2025a).

In this context, Green Keynesianism may seem like a progressive move away from a neoliberal green-market logic, but there are several caveats to consider, particularly from a global perspective. While this paradigm advocates expanding social protection systems and social investment within the context of green conditionalities, it consistently endorses policies that prioritize full employment, capital accumulation, and economic growth, driven by rising consumer demand and production growth, albeit with a focus on low-carbon and ecologically friendly products and services, as well as government intervention. In other words, it endorses increased (green) production and consumption when a system of overproduction and consumption is the root of the problem (Green 2022). Consequently, traditional economic beliefs and institutions remain largely unchallenged, despite their historical contribution to ecological degradation and social crises, and despite the unlikelihood that global green growth can be compatible with planetary boundaries (Hickel and Kallis 2020). The shortcoming of this paradigm, from a system-transformative perspective, is that it appears progressive while striving to achieve certain ecological and social goals (and often in fact accomplishes these goals to a certain degree), but only by reinforcing the capitalist reasoning that created the conditions for ecological and social crises in the first place. This reinforcement can ultimately make it more challenging to establish anti-capitalist paradigms, such as Degrowth (Laruffa 2025).

When situating Green Keynesianism within a global context, we want to highlight that just as “embedded liberalism” has generated prosperity in the Global North by externalizing its negative ecological and social consequences to the Global South, Green Keynesianism, with its decarbonization consensus, now faces a similar risk, potentially exacerbating green colonialism (Lang, Manahan, and Bringel 2024). This situation is due to its strong reliance on resource extraction for the innovation and production of green decarbonization technologies, which is already embedded in a system of unequal exchange relationships. In this system, the resource-rich Global South supplies essential raw materials for technological innovations aimed at decarbonizing economies, while also serving as potential sites for the Global North to install large-scale decarbonization infrastructure in its so-called “empty spaces” (Dietz 2024). Consequently, the Global South provides the resources that drive technological innovation, largely occurring in the Global North, which then has the potential to reap the profits by exporting these technologies worldwide. In this context, the notion of ecological protection, when merely added to a productivist and growth-oriented (but state-directed) economic system, can serve as a crucial legitimization of green colonial practices within the broader consensus on the need to shift toward a global low-carbon economy. This pattern ultimately falls short on crucial eco-social justice claims, such as reparation policies from the Global North to the South (Lang, Manahan, and Bringel 2024).

Conclusion

Our analysis of the OECD’s position on eco-social policy shows how the most progressive ideational accounts within the organization push for an eco-social policy paradigm of Green Keynesianism. While ideational accounts might support eco-social policy-entrepreneurship within the OECD to promote Green Keynesianism in its policy prescriptions, there is also strong internal contestation over these ideational accounts, suggesting that the organization does not necessarily act as a coherent actor. As mentioned earlier, Secretary-General Cormann downgraded NAEC within the OECD, suggesting a reduced appreciation and impact of the narrative NAEC has developed. In line with Schmelzer (2016), we suggest that such a move is a continuation of ongoing processes of disagreement over the appropriateness of certain policy ideas within the OECD that are closely linked to economic growth. Accordingly, the emergence of eco-social policy within the organization and, more broadly, the shift toward Green Keynesianism are part of this competition between various theories and counter-currents. This emergence and attempts at institutionalization are still ongoing. However, our discussion highlights that this paradigm may ultimately make it more difficult to transition toward system-transformative paradigms and risks reproducing unequal exchange relationships within the framework of green colonialism. It silences and suppresses anti-colonial and eco-socialist paradigms, preventing them from entering policy debates and setting a clear pathway for what is deemed appropriate for the OECD’s member states and beyond.

Notes

1. It is important to recognize that the influence of the OECD is not homogeneous across all member states. Domestic institutional contexts matter and smaller countries are more inclined to adopt OECD prescriptions (Lehtonen 2007; Radaelli 2005).
2. We do not refer to Schulze Waltrup (2025b) perspective of recomposing consumption and production as an eco-social policy paradigm because it is conceptualized as a transition strategy from Green Keynesianism to Degrowth and not necessarily as a coherent paradigm on its own (see also Gough 2017).
3. The first-order policy change reflects adjustments to existing policy instruments. Second-order change reflects changes to the policy instruments themselves. Third-order change involves a shift in the underlying perception of what the problem is, and how (and with which instruments) it should be addressed, also entailing different policy goals. Fourth-order change represents a fundamental transformation of the system, such as a shift from a capitalist to a different economic system (Buch-Hansen and Carstensen 2021; Hall 1993).
4. See <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org>.
5. Cormann was the finance minister in Australia from 2013 to 2020, largely favoring a neoclassical economic approach of free markets and fiscal conservatism. See, for example, <https://ministers.finance.gov.au/financeminister/speech/2018/12/17/speech-sydney-institute>.

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