

Submission from Fórsa Trade Union

In response to the National Economic and Social Council's Shared Island consultation on climate and biodiversity challenges and opportunities

19th March 2021

Introduction

Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the National Economic and Social Council's (NESC) Shared Island consultation on climate and biodiversity challenges and opportunities.

Fórsa has over 80,000 members in the Republic of Ireland. Although the largest number work in the civil and public service, the trade union also represents workers in the semi-state sector (commercial and non-commercial), private companies (predominantly in aviation and communications) and section 39-funded organisations in the community and voluntary sector. We are an active affiliate of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU).

In this submission, we will set out four areas which we believe should form a focus of the Shared Island initiative's work on climate and biodiversity.

- *An all-island commitment to high environmental standards.*
- *A new socio-ecological contract / The social impacts of climate policy.*
- *An active, entrepreneurial State*
- *All all-island just transition framework*

1. An all-island commitment to high environmental standards

Fórsa welcomes the publication of this consultation paper, and firmly concur with the assertion that due to our shared nature and shared atmosphere, it compels us as a shared island to develop integrated and collaborative solutions to our shared climate and biodiversity challenges and opportunities. Nature knows no border, and we must keep this firmly in mind as we develop policy responses in this area north and south.

We share the concerns detailed in the paper on the implications of Brexit in relation to environmental governance and future policy alignment. With Northern Ireland no longer beholden to European environmental regulations and governance, bound by European courts or the spirit of the European Pillar of Social Rights, we must defend against pressure to follow a deregulated 'race to the bottom' approach on the environment.

This is unquestionably needed in both jurisdictions. As the consultation paper points out, the percentage of Marine Protected Areas in both Ireland and Northern Ireland is low compared to the agreed global target. Ireland are facing legal action over levels of designation for protected areas. We can't afford to continue on the path of being European laggards on climate action when it comes to delivering on our international commitments.

The report acknowledges the considerable challenges remaining in delivering on the Irish Government's policy goal of mainstreaming the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across all policy areas. SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) are of particular concern

given our record in this area. There is therefore considerable potential in all-island collaboration on biodiversity loss, particularly regarding our shared coastal areas, marine protection and low levels of regulation of undersea activity. Other areas of significance in meeting our SDG ambitions in this area include nature-based solutions, wildlife corridors and pollination.

We should therefore seek to share ambitious all-island targets and standards for strong environmental regulation, based on the highest common denominator. We need an all-island plan based on cooperation, sharing, complementary policy and joined-up thinking, which delivers a level playing field when it comes to the environment.

One obvious example of where this makes imminent sense is the existence of a Single Electricity Market (SEM) north and south. This market covering both jurisdictions will undoubtedly be required to decarbonise, and there will be a shared necessity to scale up renewables. This calls for an all-island approach to a just transition, which is where we believe the emphasis of this Shared Island collaborative work should lie (as detailed further in section 4).

Without a standardised approach to issues such as oil drilling, fracking, gas mining etc., there is potential for the political capital and social confidence required to deliver a just transition to be undermined for the entire island.

We have much to learn from each other. Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency provides a level of robust, independent analysis that our entire island can benefit from, if adequately resourced. The level of response to recent public consultations in Northern Ireland on Marine Protected Areas and on *Environmental Plans, Principles and Governance for Northern Ireland* suggests learnings for Ireland on enabling and enhancing public participation on climate and biodiversity policy.

The ambition referred to in the paper to position cities in Ireland and Northern Ireland as leaders and innovators in the transition to a low carbon society and economy is a worthy one. We should build on the success of the *'Resilient City Initiative'* in Belfast, including the establishment of institutions such as the Belfast Climate Commission and the Resilience and Sustainability Board, to develop this approach in cities such as Dublin, Cork, Derry, Galway and Limerick.

2. A new socio-ecological contract / Social impacts of climate policy

We believe that the social aspects of climate policy require greater attention and deeper evaluation on an all-island basis, in addition to the economic and environmental impacts.

While the consultation paper recognises that environmental impacts are deeply connected to health, economic and social impacts, we believe this kind of holistic approach, as argued for by the EPA, is essential to ensuring a just transition.

At the heart of this must be a new socio ecological contract for citizens north and south of the border. This new model should move away from utilising the mere measurement of economic factors as represented by GDP, to a more comprehensive approach to wellbeing, giving due consideration to the welfare and needs of people and the wellbeing of the planet. We should embrace and utilise new wellbeing indicators, which have been inspired and recently developed based on the concept of 'Doughnut Economics'.

One critical component to this new contract is the area of working time reduction. Fórsa believe that a gradual, steady and managed transition to a shorter working week could be a 'game changer' in decarbonising our economy and combating climate change.

Previous research has shown that working hours are positively associated with ecological footprints, carbon footprints, carbon emissions and energy consumption (Fitzgerald, Jorgenson, and Clark 2015; Fitzgerald et al. 2018; Hayden and Shandra 2009; King and van den Bergh 2017; Knight et al. 2013a; Rosnick and Weisbrot 2007). These researchers suggest that reduced national working hours could be a central pillar in high-income nations' efforts to reduce their emissions (Schor 2005, 2013).

Nässén and Larsson (2015) assess the relationship between working hours and a measure of household carbon emissions and energy consumption in Sweden. Their findings indicate that decreases in working hours can reduce both emissions and energy consumption.

Broadly speaking, if we are to truly deliver climate justice, we need a much greater interaction between environmental policy and general social policy. This includes blending environmental expertise with social welfare expertise, housing expertise, planning expertise and so on.

A piecemeal approach to environmental policy without taking a big-picture view in the context of wider social policy is destined to engender opposition. Housing and climate policy are also closely intertwined. Take the debate regarding carbon taxation and fuel poverty, for example.

Adaptation plans at a local authority level and at a sectoral level need to take into account a wide variety of social factors, including demographics, ageing, energy poverty, location, air pollution, etc.

3. An active, entrepreneurial State

To truly deliver the transformational climate action required for our shared island to become a global climate leader, we need to shift our thinking from that of a facilitative State, to the entrepreneurial State as envisaged in Mariana Mazzucato's writings. The kind of long-term planning, vision and scale needed to deliver the low-carbon transition calls for a driving role for the State and leading role for public institutions. This would see the oversight and active management by the State of an ambitious 'green new deal' programme, complemented by a local authority sector enabled and empowered to play a key role in its implementation.

The State, local authorities and public bodies hold a great deal of influence over non-State aspects of the economy as a purchaser, consumer and funder, and can utilise this influence to raise environmental standards across the economy. This can be achieved through inserting environmental concerns into public procurement and grants process, and environmental clauses into public contracts. Additionally, the State can play a critical role as an employer through expanding public sector employment in important areas such as environmental protection.

Public ownership and State control of key utilities such as water services and household waste collection, will be critical in ensuring compliance with higher standards of environmental regulation.

We envision an expanded role for the local authority sector in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss, including through the following key areas:

- Increased investment in local authority maintenance and retrofitting projects, and expansion of housing capacity to deliver more sustainable, less carbon intensive construction projects.
- Enable local authorities to lead micro generation and community ownership of renewable energy projects.
- Establish a primary role for local government in setting localised 'county level' carbon reduction targets on a 32-county basis.
- Promoting the low carbon transition through public information and education programmes.
- Facilitating local farmer's markets in cities and towns to bolster the consumption of local produce, and the sustainability of incomes for local farmers and producers.

4. An all-island just transition framework

We need to define clearly what we mean by a 'Just Transition', and by climate justice. We believe it refers to a fair distribution of the costs and benefits of decarbonisation across the economy, and ensuring a smooth transition for workers by proactively managing the negative effects of decarbonisation.

We believe that an all-island 'just transition' framework should be developed, which clearly defines what climate justice looks like in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, and which has clear, specific, measurable targets and timelines. This should be applied to our low carbon development north and south.

This framework should contain six main pillars:

- Consideration of social impacts
- Social and regional proofing
- Involving employee representatives
- Skills & training
- Ensuring social protection and security
- Global leadership

An all-island forum for deliberative processes should also be established, with enhanced social dialogue with workers and their representatives, and the facilitation of enhanced community participation, at its centre.

A sectoral just transition analysis of cross-border industries should be carried out to assess the employment impacts of climate change and climate action, and put in place policies to proactively address emerging employment issues.

Communities, workers, businesses, and public authorities must be central to the transformation, as co-creators and not just participants in the process. Social dialogue, collective bargaining and workplace democracy has a key part to play in ensuring that this is the case. All-island 'green business' trademarks for sustainable workplace practices should be developed, and mainstreamed into the industrial bargaining agenda of trade unions and corporate social responsibility agenda of businesses.

The area of retraining and reskilling is a crucial one. In a previous NESC paper on *Addressing Employment Vulnerability as part of a Just Transition in Ireland*, it was recommended that the State should play an increased role in upskilling and retraining workers in occupations and sectors which are at risk of radical change or displacement, either as part of the 'fourth

industrial revolution' of digital technology and/or the transition to a low-carbon economy. It further proposes that an audit process to pinpoint these employments (assisted by the 9 regional skills fora) should take place, with the State funding one day a month of training for those identified as being at risk. Fórsa would fully support this idea being developed further towards implementation, potentially on an all-island basis.

As regards regional proofing, one of the greatest opportunities that the transition to a low carbon economy presents is the potential to drive more balanced, sustainable economic development in rural and disadvantaged regions. Pilot projects should be identified north and south in target regions for community owned micro generation.

In terms of social proofing, an all-island research project should be considered to collect data on the impact of climate change on vulnerability and human rights in Ireland and Northern Ireland.