



# **A CLEAN PLANET FOR ALL: A EUROPEAN STRATEGIC LONG-TERM VISION FOR A PROSPEROUS, MODERN, COMPETITIVE AND CLIMATE NEUTRAL ECONOMY**

**Position Paper**

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## Introduction

On 28 November 2018 the European Commission adopted a strategic long-term vision for a prosperous, modern, competitive and climate neutral economy by 2050 - A Clean Planet for all<sup>1</sup> (hereinafter: the Strategy). As a next step upon adopting A Clean Planet for all document the EU is to “adopt and submit an ambitious strategy by early 2020 to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as requested under the Paris Agreement”<sup>2</sup> following an EU-wide debate on the topic.

The Strategy is intended as a debate facilitator not a policy document in its own right. This is clearly stated from the outset: “The proposed Strategy does not intend to launch new policies, nor does the European Commission intend to revise 2030 targets.”<sup>3</sup> The passing of the Strategy is informed by the Council's and Parliament's reaffirmed commitment to the 2015 Paris Agreement. “The Strategy therefore outlines a vision of the economic and societal transformations required, engaging all sectors of the economy and society, to achieve the transition to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.”<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to follow up on our results and give recommendations for a better implementation of the Energy Union Governance Regulation as well as the NECP preparation and implementation process for the years ahead.

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1 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0773>

2 [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/2050\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/2050_en)

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## Structure of the Strategy

The Strategy is based on a much longer supporting document entitled “IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS IN SUPPORT OF THE COMMISSION COMMUNICATION COM(2018) 773”<sup>5</sup> (hereinafter: The Analysis).

The Analysis explores eight scenarios divided in three categories:

1. the well below 2 °C ambition, aiming for GHG emissions reduction levels in 2050 of around 80% compared to 1990 - five scenarios;
2. COMBO - a combination of the first category five scenarios,
3. net zero GHG emissions by 2050 pursuing efforts to achieve a 1.5 °C temperature change - two scenarios.

Only the third category scenarios are in line with the Strategy's objective of reaching a net-zero GHG emissions by mid-century. In this scenario category, remaining emissions that cannot be abated by 2050 need to be balanced out with negative emissions, including from the LULUCF6 sink. The two scenarios differ in the methods they emphasize in reaching the net-zero GHG emissions by 2050.

The 1.5TECH scenario “aims to further increase the contribution of all the technology options, and relies more heavily on the deployment of biomass associated with significant amounts of carbon capture and storage (BECCS)<sup>7</sup>”.

The 1.5LIFE scenario “relies less on the technology options of 1.5TECH, but assumes a drive by EU business and consumption patterns towards a more circular economy.”

The Strategy outlines 7 main pathways to reaching a 2050 net-zero emissions goal. They boil down to energy efficiency, renewables, cleaner mobility, circular economy, smart networks, bio-economy, and carbon capture and storage (CCS). Further the Strategy outlines what it calls “an enabling framework”, a set of change drivers which need to be taken into account in implementing the transition.

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5 [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/docs/pages/com\\_2018\\_733\\_analysis\\_in\\_support\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/docs/pages/com_2018_733_analysis_in_support_en_0.pdf)  
 6 Land Use, Land-Use Change, and Forestry  
 7 Bio-Energy With Carbon Capture And Storage

## Commentary

The positive aspect of the Strategy is that it is the first EU's commitment to reaching net-zero emissions by 2050, and EU's recognition, for now still only 'verbal', of the social aspects of climate crisis. However, the level of ambition as to how the set goal is to be achieved, as well as the underlying assumptions on which it is based, are perhaps the weakest points of this Strategy. These weak points of the Strategy beg the question whether this Strategy is just paying lip service to the ever rising awareness of just how acute the multiple ecological crisis is.

According to Climate science we have about 360 gigatons<sup>8</sup> of carbon pollution left if we want to keep well below 1.5 degree (carbon budget) with a 50% likelihood. At current rates of emissions we globally have about 8.5 years left before our carbon emissions lead to a 1.5 degree Celsius global warming. And this is only a 50:50 chance that this is actually a carbon budget we have 'at our disposal'. These figures are alarming and every assessment of political ambition to address climate change needs to take them into account. It is therefore not unsurprising that climate campaigners in some EU countries demand net-zero emissions by as early as 2030<sup>9</sup>. Paralleled to these demands a goal of net-zero by 2050 seems weak to say the least.

Signals from the EU political arena only months since the passing of this Strategy also reveal the true nature of this Strategy's (low) ambition. Although the Strategy clearly states that “The proposed Strategy does not intend to launch new policies, nor does the European Commission intend to revise 2030 targets” the members of European Parliament on 14 March 2019 voted in favor of increasing the EU's 2030 emission cuts target to 55% (from current 40%).

In part due to present debate and awareness of the urgency of climate crisis, and in part due to its low ambition and structural shortcomings, this Strategy, a year into its passing, already seems to be outdated in some parts.

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8 An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty, Chapter 2, pages 105-107: “Excluding such feedbacks, the assessed range for the remaining carbon budget is estimated to be 840, 580, and 420 Gt CO<sub>2</sub> for the 33rd, 50th and, 67th percentile of TCRE, respectively, with a median non-CO<sub>2</sub> warming contribution and starting from 1 January 2018 onward. (...) The mitigation pathways assessed in this report indicate that emissions of non-CO<sub>2</sub> forcings contribute an average additional warming of around 0.15 °C relative to 2006-2015 at the time of net zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, reducing the remaining carbon budget by roughly 320 Gt CO<sub>2</sub>.”

9 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/green-new-deal-labour-climate-change-net-zero-clive-lewis-caroline-lucas-a9111796.html>

## Problematic Assumptions

The Strategy shows little ambition in calling for a transformative change which is needed to adequately address multiple crises<sup>10</sup> we are facing - climate crisis, biodiversity crisis, and social crisis. The Strategy wrongly assumes that we are already on a good path to address these challenges by continuing the policies we already have in place<sup>11</sup>. At the same time it remains blatantly blind to its many structural flaws.

One of the most obvious ones is an unquestioned commitment to growth which rests on a Eurocentric and planetary boundaries ignoring hypothesis of decoupling. “Europeans have managed to successfully decouple greenhouse gas emissions from economic growth in Europe for the past decades” is claimed in the Strategy already in its opening chapters. This position sets the tone for the rest of the text.

Decoupling is a complex concept in its own right, and hence controversial when nonchalantly used, as is the case in this Strategy. Theoretically we should at least distinguish between relative decoupling and absolute decoupling. In the context of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions relative decoupling means that the rate at which the emissions grow is slower than the rate of GDP growth. However, emissions continue to grow.

Absolute decoupling on the other hand would mean that the economy grows while the emissions do not. The literature on decoupling often demonstrates limitations of relative decoupling but “[it does] not explicitly acknowledge that even absolute decoupling might be insufficient if it does not respect planetary limits.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the Eurocentric part of the used decoupling hypothesis is especially alarming. 'Decoupling greenhouse gas emissions from economic growth in Europe' casually ignores the defining feature of EU's economy - the fact that it is a post-industrial Western economy. In these types of economies a large proportion of emissions have been outsourced to extraction, manufacturing and distribution outside their territory. So, even if any decoupling has been achieved it is usually only decoupling within a territory. This most certainly does not reflect the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-47203344>

<sup>11</sup> European Environmental Agency (EEA), The European environment – state and outlook 2020: „Over the next decade, we are going to need very different answers to the world’s environmental and climate challenges than the ones we have provided over the past 40 years.”

<sup>12</sup> Sustainability 2016, 8, 517; doi:10.3390/su8060517; Doreen Fedrigo-Fazio, Jean-Pierre Schweitzer, Patrick ten Brink, Leonardo Mazza, Alison Ratliff and Emma Watkins: Evidence of Absolute Decoupling from Real World Policy Mixes in Europe

Paris Agreement approach of concerted action by all nor is it remotely adequate to tackle global challenges such as climate crisis. In fact it might even aggravate it.

In invoking its character as a document the aim of which “is not to set targets, but to create a vision and sense of direction” the Strategy often strays into lamenting the unknowns and enticing techno-optimism as a solution to ecological crisis. One such example is its overreliance on Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies. This despite the fact that the Analysis finds that “large ranges of possible costs and uncertainties are unavoidable since most of the options for carbon removals are only at an exploratory stage and none of them are sufficiently mature for large deployment (except afforestation, reforestation and ecosystem restoration)”<sup>13</sup>. To nevertheless base one of the seven pathways for reaching net-zero emissions goal on deploying CSS technologies seems odd at best.

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## Conclusions

This Strategy perhaps best serves as a grim reminder of the pace with which our societies are hit by ecological crisis, followed by our raised awareness of the need to immediately act in all possible ways. Only a year into its passing our understanding of urgency, and corresponding political pressures, have already been reflected in documents significantly more ambitious than this Strategy (e.g. as cited above).

However, we would be wrong to ignore this Strategy altogether. It falls short of the ambition needed, both in goals and in ground covered. However, following the logic of the latest IPCC report, by which we are no longer in a position to choose the steps to take but should take them all, we will certainly see some of the paths outlined in this Strategy followed by policy makers in the EU. And we should see them followed. But, we must insist that they be more inclusive of the society in general, more open to social innovation (and not just technical innovation), backed by significant public funds, and based on principles of social and environmental justice.

„Europe will not achieve its sustainability vision of ‘living well, within the limits of our planet’ simply by promoting economic growth and seeking to manage harmful side-effects with environmental and social policy tools.“<sup>14</sup>.

We must rethink the tools at our disposal to tackle the ‘embodied emissions’<sup>15</sup> and address ‘a spatial concept of energy’<sup>16</sup>. We must keep in mind that „while behavioural change and personal responsibility play a role in reducing emissions, restricting the focus to individuals, particularly at

the household level, fails to tackle political, industrial and economic structures and configurations over which the individual consumer has little, if any, control.“<sup>17</sup>

The mandate of the new Commission will be decisive. Proposed climate law should step up EU's ambition which should be reflected in major EU documents like the multiannual financial framework. This Strategy provides guidance both in terms of the direction EU's climate policy will develop, and in terms of identifying its blind spots. It is therefore of crucial importance to

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<sup>14</sup> European Environmental Agency (EEA), The European environment – state and outlook 2020

<sup>15</sup> “approximately one quarter of global GHG emissions embodied within goods, services and commodities imported and consumed by the world's high-income consumers.“ (Baker 2017)

<sup>16</sup> „Energy consumption is [therefore] inaccurately and inequitably portrayed within a ‘national scalar frame’, as a result of which the environmental and social origins of GHG emissions embodied within consumer and capital goods go unrecognised“ (Baker 2017)

<sup>17</sup> Baker, Lucy: Of embodied emissions and inequality: Rethinking energy consumption (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.09.027>

follow up that process and create enough political pressure which will enable ambitious policies keeping us below 1.5 °C. If not, we will most certainly be faced with much harder task of returning below overshoot temperature increase, with devastating consequences for the lives of people around the world, including the EU.

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