

Editor's introduction: Changing the conversation about climate change

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Storm Éowyn in January 2025 was a wake-up call for many in Ireland. Elsewhere in Europe and globally we see rapid and accelerating climate change. The 2024 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) *Ireland's State of the Environment Report* reiterates that nothing less than transformation of energy, transport, food and industry sectors is needed to achieve a sustainable future (EPA, 2024). A focus on socially just transformation has increasingly entered the public and political discourse (Fischer & Giuliani, 2025). This special issue aims to contribute to Ireland's needed journey of transformation to become a sustainable state and society, one where people have human needs met, while respecting planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017). This approach requires a transformative strategy to achieve a holistic and systemic reorganisation of the systems that society depends on to unlock just climate action with equitable human well-being. Transformation has been described as:

a fundamental qualitative change...that often involves a change in paradigm and may include shifts in perception and meaning, changes in underlying norms and values, reconfiguration of social networks and patterns of interaction, changes in power structures, and the introduction of new institutional arrangements and regulatory frameworks. (Kates, Travis & Wilbanks, 2012, p. 1).

A transformative strategy can be differentiated from incremental strategies of small changes to existing practices which sustain the functioning of existing socio-ecological systems under climate change. This is not an argument against incremental reforms, in practice there is often a synergistic relationship between incremental (non-reformist) reforms that open up longer-term transformative pathways (Murphy, 2023). Transformation encapsulates a vision not only of net zero carbon emissions but a net zero equitable society, a national mission that needs to be accomplished within three decades, and that encompasses everyone and everything (O’Riordan, 2023). However Ireland’s current policy direction predominantly emphasises technology transitions, rather than wider systemic transformations and shifts in development pathways (Thorne et al., 2023). Transformation integrates ecological and social change. It prioritises eco-social policy where what is good for climate sustainability is good for society, and vice versa. This special issue aims to amplify and draw attention to the social science contribution to climate change, and focuses on the cojoined relationship between eco-social policy and climate policy, reinforcing the need for transformative and systemic change (Murphy, 2023).

Delivering the required scale of transformative change requires mobilising all of society. Public engagement and participation in development and implementation of transition management is essential (Thorne et al., 2023). This is true of both mitigation and adaption, and, in turn, requires changing the conversation about climate change so that it focuses on both climate and inequality so that everyone feels included in the conversation. Revez et al. (2022) map emergent public engagement in Ireland across practical, political and personal public transition discourses. They argue the role of public engagement in societal change, while essential, is poorly understood, siloed and fragmented. There is a growing awareness, illustrated in the articles in this special edition, that implementation requires bottom-up and inclusive forms of public engagement which embrace diversity and disruption. The rest of this introduction focuses on three aspects of enabling transformation:

- (i) Changing the conversation about climate change – *how we talk*,
- (ii) Changing and achieving greater clarity about the language used to describe policy and political goals – *what we talk about*;
- (iii) Changing the governance of climate and inequality to achieve more multi-spatial/actor governance – changing ‘*who*’ talks and ‘*where*’.

This introduction briefly discusses these three challenges. The eight research and forum articles in this special edition are then introduced. Collectively, they contribute to advancing transformative conversation about climate action and climate justice.

Changing the conversation about climate change – how we talk

This special edition was inspired by a project undertaken in Co. Kerry in 2023 by Uplift, the people-powered digital campaigning organisation. Uplift set out to uncover how regular people feel about climate change, how this relates to their day-to-day lives and how to communicate and engage in public discourse on climate (Uplift, 2024). In particular, the project was a deep listening exercise seeking to actively hear what people think and how people feel about climate change. A language analysis of data from fifty deep-listening conversations was undertaken by Parable Grassroots Communications and the learnings were translated into a narrative guide by strategic communicators ASO Communications. Uplift built some core narrative learning from the analysis that could be used to maximise climate solutions. It found most people in Ireland care about climate change, trust the science and believe we must reduce toxic emissions. However, it found people to be quite reasonably fed up as they saw corporate leaders and government decision makers 'let off the hook' while individuals are condescended to by 'preachy climate commentators'. Uplift found that the 'your way of life is under threat and the future is gloomy' message perpetuated by those opposing change generates strong feelings of fear, loss, individualism and protectionism. However, those espousing a more progressive transformative agenda do not have a compelling message that connects with and persuades people. Uplift found those interested in transformational change need to be positive about what is practically needed and to relate this to practical things people want for a decent life. They observe these are things that fit perfectly with a transition away from dependency on oil, gas and coal. Being transformational and changing the conversation about climate change means articulating what the future looks like in practical ways, clean air, clean water and healthy food; safe, warm, secure homes; effective public transport; good jobs close to home that allow us to have dignity in our working lives and our old age; and care when we are sick. Uplift advises leading with solutions, not focusing on problems or making

futile ‘protests against “climate change”’. Rather, people want tangible, solutions that respond to their material needs and strengthen their sense of belonging. This is key to motivating and mobilising people, who need to see the future as open and worth influencing.

Those interested in transformational change need to be clear about naming and explaining ‘who’ is causing disasters linked to our changing climate, otherwise people will blame ‘natural’ causes, point the finger at each other, or adopt wild conspiracy theories. Clearly naming and linking the people and institutions standing in the way of a good life and limiting global heating enables others to build a plan and engage people to do something about it. Uplift argues that we need to stop telling people they do not care when they do care. Stories about collective action are also important to encourage wider collective scaled impacts. By creating and telling stories that ‘show not tell’, we create the conditions for change from where people are. These stories need to focus on the bigger ‘we’, and ‘validate our shared values, experiences and show the power of solidarity and belonging... Stories that foster solidarity across ethnic and social class are particularly important... Local media is popular as a news source with people who are “persuadable” on climate change’. While social media is ‘the most popular source of information to a changed conversation’, we are reminded that the challenge goes beyond zero emissions. Future conversations have to take equality as as serious an objective as zero carbon emissions. Equality has intrinsic value underpinning the vision of the world we are trying to create, it also has an instrumental value, the politics of achieving zero emissions requires that people feel equal and know their future security and cohesion is guaranteed.

Changing and achieving greater clarity about the language used to describe policy and political goals – what we talk about

Changing the conversation about climate change requires new understandings and perspectives that conjoin social policy and climate policy. O’Riordan (2023) argues there is no suitable language for all that is taking place. Many by now note possible synergies and trade-offs between social and ecological goals and their potential integration through eco-social policies. Other concepts like well-being, sufficiency and doughnut economics also address transformative framing about climate change. However to the uninitiated reader there can be much confusion about different language, effectively many words and

concepts sound similar and people can be forgiven for not knowing what to say or how to respond to different concepts. In addition, some experts (and politicians) can manipulate language, sometimes 'green-washing', using positive-sounding words to cover up in-action.

Many of the concepts and related strategies are quite elastic and the same language can be used to describe policy that is not transformational as well as policy that is transformational. A critical awareness of different concepts and their use can help avoid green-washing, manipulation and fear of using the wrong words. Nenning et al. (2023) developed a typology to make sense of various frames used in a European context and was particularly interested in understanding how various climate-relevant social policy agendas relate to economic policy and growth. We can ask the same question about how different concepts relate to ambitions for transformation. Figure 1 illustrates the typology of different frames, and aids understanding of how to identify different climate discourses.

The vast majority of European Union (EU) social policy is framed as pro-growth, consistent with a business-as-usual approach, including eco-modernisation and forms of techno-optimism that rely on technological advances to achieve policy goals and that are consistent with green growth. These approaches (the upper line in Fig. 1) are not transformative and do little to address underlying issues of social equity. The middle line of Figure 1 includes both a Just Transition policy and some iterations of the well-being economy, as well as the EU Green Deal and variants of eco-social policy. These are relatively elastic concepts and appear in different forms, they are often ambivalent in relation to economic growth, in straddling the middle, such discourses can compromise ambitions about transformation. Stevis et al. (2020) argue, for example, that the concept of a just transition often relies on different dimensions of justice and is used by a variety of actors in different contexts. Over time, the concept becomes a 'contested notion', characterised by 'blurred conceptual boundaries and multiple interpretations and usages'.

The third type of narratives (the bottom line of Fig. 2) are clearer in their policy intent and often grouped under the heading 'transformational economics' (Dixon de Cleave et al., 2022). They go beyond growth, and focus on redistribution, needs satisfaction and well-being for all. Some of this language, degrowth (often understood as the journey) and post-growth (understood as the destination) language is often controversial with many not wishing to advocate declining resource use in the Global South and others wishing to

associate with a more positive and hopeful way of framing the future. Positive concepts include the well-being framework (discussed in Dukelow’s article), and doughnut economics which enables us to conceptualise a way of provisioning that meets human needs while respecting boundaries. These concepts embrace expansive versions of eco-social policy and sustainable welfare, approaches that conjoin climate and social policy for systemic transformation (Murphy, 2023). Fritz and Lee (2024, p. 320) define sustainable welfare as a new social policy paradigm which deals with the problem of how to provide human welfare without undermining planetary well-being, by studying policy solutions that aim to create synergy between social justice, ecological sustainability and democratic participation, and see eco-social policies as the concrete instruments that translate sustainable welfare into practice. Such approaches are also informed by eco-feminist approaches that champion, care, intersectionality and anti-racism embedded in de-colonialisation.

This very short overview of different approaches to talking about climate change reminds us of the need to understand the different frames and how they can be used and manipulated in public discourse.

Figure 1: Narratives and concepts related to transformation



Changing the governance of climate and inequality to achieve more multi-spatial/actor governance – changing ‘who’ talks ‘where’

There is a clear relationship between governance processes or interventions, understood as acts to improve governance systems by facilitating how things are done rather than what is done (Teemer

et al., 2017, p. 562). To cojoin climate and social policy governance, we need to begin by analysing the range of governance approaches to climate and social policy development and implementation. Mandelli and Murphy, in their mapping of EU-level processes in the first article in this special edition, highlight how climate and environmental policy builds from greater levels of EU competence with a stronger legislative basis for action, than the softer non-legislative EU competence for social policy. Sabato (2025) finds a lack of coherence and integration between green transition and social policies, particularly at the EU level. The two policy domains are not fully integrated, and social protection and inclusion policies require further development to ensure their alignment with green transition objectives.

At the national level, there is also a distinct lack of policy coherence across climate and social inclusion policy spheres. Figure 2 maps both climate and social inclusion governance regimes to enable identification of the gaps between the two. The climate governance organigram (Institute of Public Administration (IPA), 2025), an existing template,¹ was used to develop a comparative organigram for social inclusion governance. What is presented is necessarily selective and is for illustrative purposes only. The two organigrams are offered as basic comparative sketches of both policy governance regimes, capturing evolving, incomplete and unclear processes.

While there are overall observations that can be made about good governance, including the need for multi-scalar and multi-stakeholder governance, greater overall capacity and a focus on bridging the policy and implementation divide (O'Riordan et al., 2022; IPA, 2024), our focus here is on the overlap between climate and social policy. The aim is to identify formal governance overlap and also the key actors, agencies or processes that have potential to synergise governance across climate and social policy. Some, like the Climate Change Advisory Council, are relatively well-developed but are still evolving in function and practice. Others like the Just Transition Commission are works-in-progress and have potential to develop. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC), the primary role of which is to

¹ In 2021, following Climate Action Delivery Board needs assessment, the IPA was engaged in 2022 by the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform to carry out an assessment of climate capacity across the civil service to address significant challenges that the system faces in planning, implementing and updating climate action goals. The climate action governance structure was published in 2025 as part of the IPA report.

Figure 2a: Climate Action Governance Framework and selected Social Inclusion Governance Framework

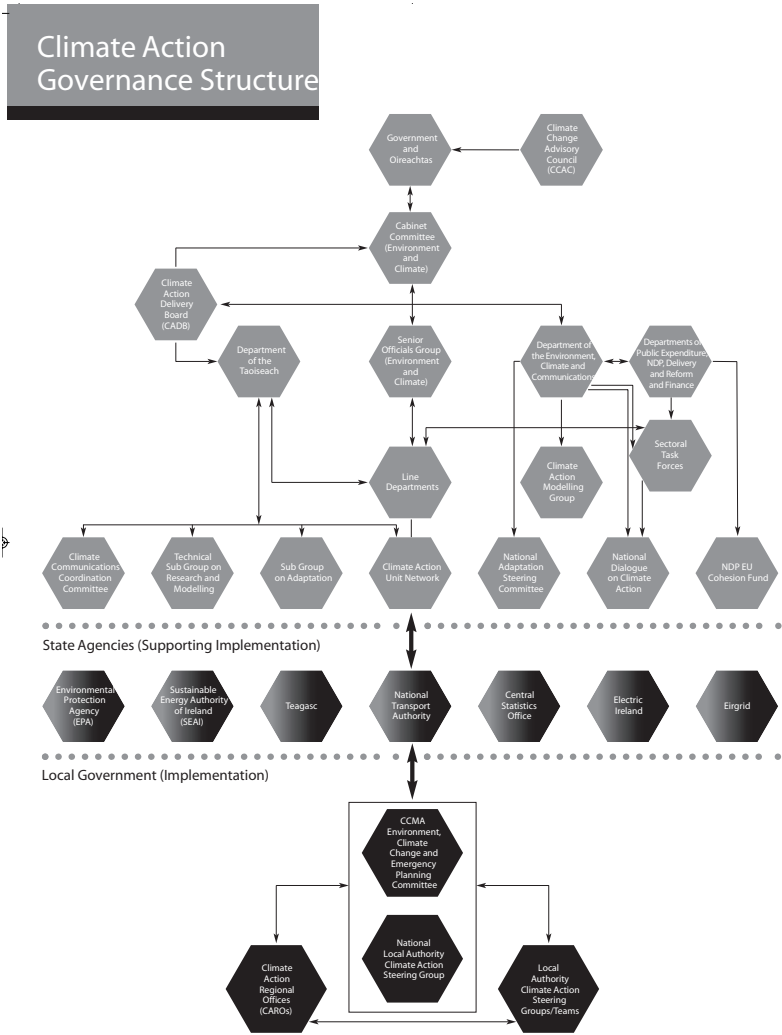
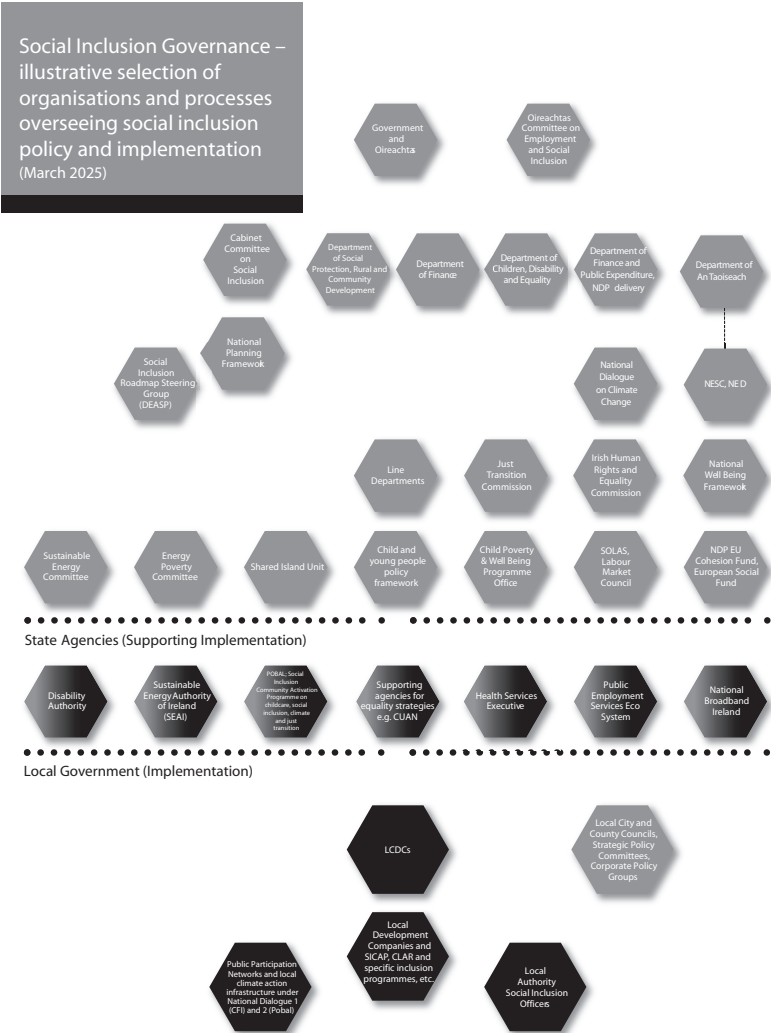


Figure 2b: Climate Action Governance Framework and selected Social Inclusion Governance Framework



advise the Taoiseach on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development in Ireland, has since 2012 integrated sustainability into economic and social policy. NESC seems an obvious space from which to develop and communicate integrated policy across environmental, social and economic planning but to achieve such a role, NESC may need better integration, for example through observational status in key governance processes. The council may also be the conduit to developing more structured civil and social dialogue, perhaps interacting with other processes, including the National Dialogue on Climate Action. There also needs to be more consistent support civil society organisations to participate in such processes (for example through Pobal). The latter bridges national to local governance processes supporting public participation networks, social inclusion steering groups, and many varied climate and social inclusion offices and roles within local government, local and community development and local government climate action steering groups/teams. We can also learn from good practice ‘cross-cutting’ ways, the Department of Environment and Climate Change works through the warmer homes scheme to help address energy poverty and climate mitigation; and carbon budget expenditure.² The overall focus needs to be on developing more overlap between climate and social inclusion governance, while being inclusive and supporting equal participation, diversity of knowledge, including experiential knowledge in governing transformation.

Outline of content of this special edition

The special issue first contextualises Ireland within the EU climate policy Just Transition framework. It then discusses key governance issues, including the urgent concerns relating to adaptation, the challenge of policy coherence across water, the circular economy and the bioeconomy, and the challenges of working with the elastic concept of well-being through both mainstream and transformational climate perspectives. Two forum articles reflect on the issues of implementation relating to a Just Transition for agriculture and the potential of focusing on gender equality and care as climate priorities. The forum section continues with an interview by guest editor Prof Mary Murphy capturing the reflections of Dr Laura Burke who is

² <https://consult.decc.gov.ie/en/consultation/call-expert-evidence-climate-action-plan-2024/chapter/carbon-pricing-and-cross-cutting-issues>

retiring after ten years as Director General of the Irish Environmental Protection Agency. Finally, a book review by Peadar Kirby explores Jennie Stephens' 2025 book *Climate Justice and the University*, which reimagines the potential of transformative higher education and asks how to accelerate universities as spaces to advance social change for the public good.

The first paper by Mandelli and Murphy sets the scene, outlining the broad parameters of economic, social and environmental policy in the EU before detailing more specific climate function relating to the EU framework for climate action plans, the Green Deal and Just Transition. Mandelli and Murphy's focus then shifts to the Irish policy framework outlining the statutory basis for climate action plans and the trajectory of Just Transition in Ireland.

O'Riordan and Boyle's paper reviews policy coherence in Ireland in respect of water, the circular economy and the bioeconomy. Policy coherence refers to the mutually reinforcing policy actions across government in order to achieve agreed objectives. Policy coherence supports better governance. It has become prominent in the area of sustainable development as it is seen as critical to delivering on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, and ultimately better outcomes for citizens. The paper uses the recommendation for *Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019) as a framework of analysis in reviewing policy coherence in the three policy areas. The paper concludes more can be done to achieve good cross-government collaboration and engagement across each of the policy areas. In particular, more concerted effort is required to achieve the sort of policy coherence necessary to achieve transformative improvements in respect of water, the circular economy and bioeconomy.

The next article develops an assessment of issues relating to adaptation, building from the late 2023 series *Ireland's Climate Change Assessment* which established overall progress against key benchmarks (EPA, 2023). Murphy et al. reflect on *Volume 3: Being Prepared for Ireland's Future Climate*, which focused on adaptation to the reality of how climate change is already impacting Ireland (rising temperatures, more frequent extreme weather events, and increasing risks such as coastal erosion and flooding). The article reflects on the extensive research in the assessment and discusses the road map for being prepared for Ireland's future climate. Adaptation is becoming a pressing concern as climate risks escalate, the authors discuss how

adaptation and resilience are framed in Irish climate policy and highlight key challenges in implementation and related governance, including the need for a socially inclusive approach, quicker progress, cross-sectoral coordination, financial investment, and community engagement for a climate-resilient Ireland.

Dukelow's article aims to situate and critique Ireland's Wellbeing Framework (WBF) within the discourse and developments on the well-being economy as a means of transitioning to sustainable welfare and a post-growth society (including reform of welfare states and introduction of eco-social policies to achieve well-being by meeting basic human needs for all within planetary boundaries). The article asks whether the well-being economy is an effective paradigm to mainstream post-growth policies and whether there is transformative potential in Ireland's 2021 WBF. It looks at the degree to which Ireland's adoption of a well-being narrative and policy framework demonstrates an opening to address the challenges of going beyond the growth dependence of the welfare state and the increasing urgency of the contradictions of green growth. While warning against conflated, WBFs and well-being economies, Dukelow concludes the former are an important tool of a well-being economy approach and its transformative post-growth potential.

In the Forum section of the special edition, Moore and Garvey's article examines Just Transition from an agricultural perspective. This paper draws on the process and conclusions of an eighteen-month-long project by the NESC that examined what could form the basis of a just transition in Irish agriculture and land use (NESC, 2023). The project built on earlier NESC work that had helped inform the development of a National Just Transition Framework, first set out in the *Climate Action Plan 2021* (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2021). This well-being framework understands Just Transition as prioritising and seeking to achieve a climate transition that is fair, equitable, and inclusive in terms of processes and outcomes. The authors relate this work to sectoral emissions ceilings as part of Ireland's carbon budget process as well as sectoral strategies such as the *Bioeconomy Action Plan* (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2022) and Food Vision 2030.

In the second Forum paper, Stephens and O'Connor focus on gender, care and climate arguing for a more just, healthy, climate-stable future, and for transformative change to shift climate discourse to focus on gender equity and care. As the island of Ireland faces the prospect of unification and constitutional change, new opportunities

for integrating gender equity and care as foundational priorities are emerging. This article describes why a feminist perspective centring gender equity and care has to be at the core of all climate policies in Ireland and beyond. To achieve this an integrated joined-up approach to transformative change that prioritises gender equity and care is urgently needed. The paper concludes that Ireland is uniquely positioned to demonstrate global climate justice leadership by ensuring gender equity and care are at the core of all climate discourse, programmes, initiatives and policies.

The Forum section also includes a lightly edited transcript of an interview with Laura Burke who in April 2025 retired as Director General (DG) of the EPA. It was recorded with Mary Murphy, Professor of Sociology, in Maynooth University in an in-person interview on 28 February 2025. As DG, Laura led and strategically managed the EPA since 2011. Laura was the Chair of the European Environment Agency Management Board from 2017 to 2023 and is a member of the Climate Change Advisory Council, and of the High-Level Implementation Committee for Food Vision 2030. The interview reflects on four themes: the role and contribution of the EPA, the transformational challenges aired in this special issue, and wider global environmental issues, as well as her personal reflection on retiring from the role. The Forum section concludes with Peadar Kirby's (Emeritus Professor, University of Limerick) review of Jennie Stephens' 2025 book *Climate Justice and the University*, and explores core themes including reality of Irish higher education, the potential of transformative higher education and what can be done to reform Irish universities so they contribute to transformative change.

In their 2024 annual assessment of Ireland's climate change performance, Friends of the Earth Ireland shifted its assessment of Ireland from 'a climate laggard' to 'a climate leader' upgrading the government's performance from C+ to B-. It noted positive progress across several commitments, including climate governance, emissions and adaptation; nature and biodiversity; drinking and wastewater; waste and circular economy; buildings; and agriculture, but also noted a lack of progress in marine protected areas and little progress on climate funding; air quality; transportation; and energy. However, we also see in Laura Burke's (DG EPA) interview the reality, based on all the planned and current policies, that Ireland will not hit either its EU or national targets and will only see a 29 per cent reduction of carbon emissions, based on 2018 levels by 2030. This special issue reminds us of our collective challenge to go beyond zero emissions to include

climate justice and to take equality as seriously an objective as zero carbon emissions. Equality has intrinsic value underpinning the vision of the world we are trying to create, it also has an instrumental value, the politics of achieving zero emissions requires procedural justice. People need to feel equal and need to know and be involved in ensuring their future economic and social security is guaranteed. The social cohesion that inclusive participation can engender makes it easier to enact and deliver transformational policy.

Thank you to the various contributors for so readily agreeing to contribute to this *Administration* special issue, thanks to those who undertook peer reviews, often in a tight time frame, and special thanks to the Journal Editor, Joanna O’Riordan, for agreeing to make space for this important special issue, to Lucy Hogan for copy-editing, and to EPA DG Laura Burke for so readily agreeing to be interviewed. Much appreciation to the IPA editorial team for smoothing out the process and working to tight deadlines. Finally thanks to you, the reader, for taking part in a conversation that brings climate and inequality together. I hope the conversation continues.

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Research articles

