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Civil Society Engagement and Climate Policy-Making: First Recommendations from HRJust Fieldwork Activities

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Introduction

Climate change is not just an environmental crisis – it is also a social and human rights crisis. As Europe works toward ambitious climate goals, there is growing recognition that who is involved in shaping climate policy, and how they are involved, determines the success and fairness of climate action. The EU's climate transition under the European Green Deal must address questions of justice: **Are policies protecting the most vulnerable? Are citizens meaningfully engaged? Are we upholding human rights and gender equality in our climate response?** This policy paper addresses these questions by synthesizing findings from the HRJust research project, with particular regard to its work on climate litigation and civil society engagement through a human rights and intersectional lens.

Why focus on civil society and human rights? Climate policies can only achieve broad, lasting support if they reflect society's voices. Civil society organizations, from environmental NGOs to youth and indigenous groups, have led the way in pushing for stronger climate action and highlighting injustices. They are also key players in climate litigation, using courts to enforce climate commitments when political processes fall short. At the same time, climate change exacerbates existing inequalities – for example, extreme weather hits disadvantaged communities hardest, and adaptation resources often fail to reach those most in need. A climate policy that is "green" but ignores social equity could deepen these divides. Therefore, engaging civil society continuously and using human rights as a guiding framework are critical strategies to improve climate governance.

The HRJust project has introduced and developed the concept of Systematic Ongoing Direct Civil Society Engagement (ODCSE) as a way to strengthen democracy and accountability in policy-making. This policy paper explores how ODCSE can inform EU climate governance.[1]

Civil Society Engagement and the ODCSE Methodology

Civil society has a vital role in climate policy. Whether through advocacy campaigns, community projects, or lawsuits, civil society groups often act as the conscience and driving force for climate action. The HRJust project underscored the importance of moving from sporadic input to a systematic, ongoing dialogue with civil society on climate issues. This led to the development of the ODCSE methodology – Systematic Ongoing Direct Civil Society Engagement – a structured approach to embed civil society input at all stages of climate governance.

[1] Based on the work carried out by HRJust research teams led by Prof. Fornalé (WP leader in the HRjust project) at the World Trade Institute of the University of Bern and by Dr Federica Cristani at the Institute of International Relations Prague.

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What is ODCSE? It is a bottom-up methodology that ensures civil society organizations and citizens are directly and regularly involved in decision-making, not just consulted after decisions are nearly final. ODCSE is characterized by being:

- **Systematic:** Engagement is built into the policy process (e.g. regular forums, working groups, and consultations scheduled throughout policy design, implementation, and review).
- **Ongoing:** Instead of one-time hearings, there is continuous exchange. Civil society feedback is sought and acted upon in an iterative way.
- **Direct:** Citizens and grassroots groups engage directly with policymakers, rather than only through intermediary organizations. This can include town hall meetings, participatory workshops, or online platforms that allow individuals to voice concerns and propose ideas.
- **Inclusive:** The methodology explicitly aims for broad inclusion, with special efforts to bring in underrepresented voices – women, youth, minorities, and communities most affected by climate impacts – ensuring a gender and intersectional approach to participation.

HRJust's civil society engagement activities (including workshops and interviews across countries) provided practical insights. Participants in a 2024 workshop on climate litigation and intersectionality, for example, shared how involving diverse groups leads to more comprehensive solutions. They discussed ways to address gender gaps in climate policy and the protection of human rights defenders who advocate for climate justice. These dialogues reinforced that those who experience climate impacts or defend environmental rights often have unique expertise on what policies work on the ground.

Why does ODCSE improve climate governance? First, it builds social consent for the climate transition. Policies developed with community input are more likely to be accepted and implemented successfully. Engaging those directly affected, such as coal sector workers in a just transition plan or farmers in drought adaptation measures, helps anticipate social impacts and avoid backlash. As the analysis carried out by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster noted, technocratic policy-making alone cannot secure the public buy-in that a just transition needs; active engagement of communities is essential to meet people's needs and pre-empt resistance. When people see their concerns reflected in policy, they are more likely to support and trust climate initiatives.

Second, systematic engagement taps into local knowledge and innovation. Citizens and NGOs can highlight on-the-ground realities that remote officials might miss – for instance, pointing out why a flood defence plan may not reach certain vulnerable neighbourhoods, or bringing new ideas for recycling and mobility from community experience. ODCSE provides a channel for this two-way learning: policymakers inform the public about climate goals, and society informs policymakers about practical constraints and values. This feedback loop leads to better-designed, more resilient policies.

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Third, ODCSE helps the EU and Member States fulfil their legal commitments to public participation. Under the Aarhus Convention and EU law, the public has rights to participate in environmental decision-making. However, current practices often rely on inviting input from established stakeholder organizations (business associations, major NGOs, etc.) while neglecting direct citizen engagement. The HRJust findings echo warnings from civil society that this approach is insufficient: without actively reaching out to everyday people, especially those most vulnerable to climate impacts, policy-makers risk missing key perspectives eeb.org. Moreover, failing to enable direct citizen participation could mean countries are not truly meeting their Aarhus Convention obligations, potentially opening the door to legal challenges. By adopting ODCSE, the EU would demonstrate compliance with both the spirit and letter of these democratic principles.

In summary, the ODCSE methodology offers a blueprint for the EU to institutionalise participatory climate governance. It moves beyond ad-hoc consultations to a model where civil society engagement is continuous and valued. The result is a climate policy that is more democratic, better informed, and more just.

Implications for EU Climate Governance

The findings from HRJust WP6 carry several important implications for how the EU designs and implements climate policy. At their core is a message that process matters as much as outcomes: *how* policies are made – inclusively or exclusively, transparently or opaquely – will shape their success and justice. Below are key areas where EU climate governance can be informed by the ODCSE methodology and the research insights:

1. Embedding Participation into Policy Structures: The EU should move beyond treating public participation as a checkbox exercise and instead weave ODCSE-style engagement into the fabric of climate governance. This could involve creating formal channels for ongoing civil society input at the EU level – for example, a dedicated Forum that would meet regularly with the European Commission and Parliament to discuss climate strategies. Additionally, when the European Commission drafts major climate initiatives, it can convene deliberative panels of citizens from all member states to provide recommendations, similar to the Conference on the Future of Europe deliberative panels.

2. Transparency and Accountability via Civil Society: An ongoing engagement framework would also serve as a watchdog mechanism. Civil society can monitor progress on climate targets and alert institutions to implementation gaps or injustices. For instance, as the EU and Member States deploy the substantial funds for green transition, civil society observers could be integrated into review committees to flag if money is reaching the right projects and communities. This kind of participatory oversight improves transparency and can prevent misallocation or policies that look good on paper but fail on the ground. The HRJust project's approach of co-generating data with civil society (through dialogues and surveys)

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demonstrates how non-governmental actors can contribute to identifying gaps in policy – in this case, gaps in human rights protection – which then inform better recommendations. The EU should embrace co-generation of knowledge, for example, by supporting citizen science on climate impacts or community-led assessments of local climate vulnerability to feed into official planning.

3. Rights-Based Policy Framework: EU climate governance should explicitly incorporate a rights-based framework. Practically, this means when developing or reviewing any climate-related law or strategy, the EU should ask: does this uphold the rights of people, and if not, how can it be adjusted?.

In EU external action, a rights-based approach to climate means the EU would champion issues of climate justice in international forums. This could include pushing for recognition of the right to a healthy environment globally, supporting international initiatives that help vulnerable countries adapt, and making sure that EU climate finance prioritizes projects that benefit marginalized groups (women, indigenous peoples, etc.).

In sum, the implications for EU climate governance center on making the system more open, responsive, and justice-oriented. By adopting the above approaches, EU institutions can create a virtuous cycle: inclusive governance yields better climate outcomes, which in turn enhance public trust and empowerment, further reinforcing democracy. The final section presents concrete policy recommendations to operationalize these insights.

Policy Recommendations

Building on the analysis above, we propose the following actionable recommendations for EU institutions (the European Commission, European Parliament, Council, and relevant agencies) to strengthen climate governance through participatory and intersectional approaches:

1. **Institutionalize Ongoing Civil Society Engagement:** Create formal mechanisms at the EU level for continuous civil society input on climate policy. For example, establish a Forum that convenes regularly (at least biannually) with diverse representatives – NGOs, youth, workers, frontline communities – to discuss and co-design climate initiatives. Integrate this with decision-making by mandating that major EU climate proposals include a "civil society engagement report" summarizing how input was received and influenced the outcome.
2. **Enhance Public Participation in Member States:** Issue strengthened guidelines or a Commission Recommendation to Member States on implementing the public participation requirements of the Aarhus Convention in climate matters.

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3. **Adopt a Rights-Based Climate Action Framework:** Integrate human rights explicitly into EU climate policies. This framing can guide more efficient adaptation efforts as necessary to fulfil human rights obligations.
4. **Recognize Extraterritorial Climate Responsibilities:** The EU should formally acknowledge that it has human rights responsibilities toward those affected by climate change outside its borders.
5. **Foster Local-Level Participatory Climate Governance Hubs**: there is a need to also empower local governments and municipalities. These local authorities are often on the frontlines of climate adaptation and have the closest links to affected communities. The EU should support Member States in establishing local participatory climate governance hubs (e.g., city-level climate forums, municipal climate justice councils). These hubs would operationalise the ODCSE principles at the grassroots level, ensuring that local voices, particularly those of marginalised groups, feed directly into policy development and implementation.

Each of these recommendations is aimed at embedding the values of participation, transparency, equality, and accountability into the heart of EU climate governance. They are mutually reinforcing – progress on one will support the others. What is needed is the political will to scale up these practices and make them standard operating procedure.

Conclusions

The European Union has declared its ambition to be a global leader on climate change. Leadership, however, is not just about setting emission targets – it is about how we achieve them and who is included in the journey. This policy paper has outlined how insights from the HRJust project's research on climate litigation and civil society engagement can help the EU lead by example, by making climate governance more participatory, rights-based, and attuned to gender and intersectional justice.

The evidence is clear: when people are empowered to engage continuously, climate policies become more legitimate and effective; when human rights guide our climate actions, we safeguard both planet and people; and when we address the needs of all groups in society, we unleash the full potential for innovation and solidarity in the face of the climate crisis. Conversely, if we ignore these lessons, we risk climate strategies that provoke public resistance, leave the vulnerable behind, or even face legal defeats in court.

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