

Vulnerability and the Green New Deal: A Note of Caution

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April 10, 2020

With the calls for a Green New Deal in the US and the announcement of a Green Deal in EU, the recognition that climate change does and will not affect everyone equally has been celebrated by some as a win for climate justice. Brayton Noll and Marula Tsagkari critically examine the use of vulnerability in climate discourse as it is formulated in these two agendas. Moving forward, they call for a nuanced, differentiated approach which recognises the historical roots of today's inequalities as well as the agency of the groups concerned.

Vulnerable originates from the Latin word *vulnus*, meaning “wound”, and the late Latin adjective *vulnerabilis*, meaning “wounded”. As an adjective, the word vulnerable is used in various contexts implying exposure and harm to an external factor. According to several online opinion pieces, being vulnerable is a necessity in successful personal relationships. To the medical community, it categorises an individual or a group that is more susceptible to diseases or cannot care for themselves. For conservation biologists, it describes a species likely to become endangered. There are many other specialised and context-specific applications of the term.

The term has a long history describing human-environmental interactions and number of different tools have been created in an effort to identify the “root causes” of vulnerability.^[1] In the global context of climate change, different groups such as women and indigenous communities are often identified as being more vulnerable. It is this use of the collective label of vulnerable that we want to focus on here. This use of vulnerability as a collective noun creates a category of people with assumed characteristics. This framing has received critical attention, especially in the context of international aid and vulnerability assessments in the Global South. Significantly less scrutinised, however, is the use of vulnerability when discussing the impacts of climate change on different communities in the Global North.

What's up with the Green New Deal?

Here, we heed this gap and discuss the use of vulnerability in the Green New Deal, a policy agenda that has received considerable recent attention in both North America and Europe with the Green New Deal resolution from the US and the European Green Deal communication. There are numerous other Green New Deal texts as well, but these two are the most prominent and have the power to affect the vast majority of residents in the Global North.

Both texts acknowledge that climate change will significantly impact the respective regions and lay out different adaptation and mitigation strategies to address expected challenges. The documents recognise, to different degrees, that climate change will not impact everyone equally and, with varying connotations, use vulnerability to describe communities that will be more affected by climate change, are less prepared to deal with the impacts, and are marginalised by society. But this kind of uncritical grouping can have future consequences and prescribing the label of vulnerable can be both unwanted and misleading.

The first text with the name “Green New Deal” was released in 2008 in the UK. The name is a nod to the New Deal, a series of public programmes introduced by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's to lift the US out of the

Great Depression. Similar concepts to the Green New Deal have existed for some time, but thanks in part to growing public awareness surrounding climate change, proposals have been popularised and are increasingly discussed in the mainstream media. Principally, the Green New Deal and the European Green Deal focus on green investments, creation of green jobs, welfare policies, especially regarding housing, education, and healthcare. National security, social justice, and economic wellbeing are also emphasised.

In the US, the Green New Deal enjoys support in the Democratic Party, especially among its more left-leaning members and it was endorsed by several of 2020 Democratic presidential candidates. [[Probable nominee Joe Biden](#) so far indicated only that he will adopt the rhetoric not the substance of the Green New Deal resolution, read more on the [Green New Deal in the US](#)] The plan calls for the US to switch to 100 per cent renewable energy by 2030 and includes a special mention of the “transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities...” The labels: “frontline and vulnerable communities” are frequently referred to throughout the resolution text and include: “indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth.”

Meanwhile, the EU’s Green Deal policy aims to make Europe “the world’s first climate-neutral continent by 2050”. Its December 2019 communication refers to the most vulnerable as “the most exposed to the harmful effects of climate change and environmental degradation”, highlighting the need for a just energy transition to protect these communities.

The Green New Deal’s acknowledgement of historical “systemic injustices” that, exacerbated by climate change, contribute to different communities increased risk is laudable, but the text stops short of full acknowledgement of the role that the US government as an institution has (and continues to) play in hindering the capacity of many of these communities. In contrast, the European Green Deal, completely negates any historic perspective and there is no specific mention of why certain groups face greater exposure or harm from climate change. This lack of historical perspective frames vulnerability as a natural construct and fails to discuss the unequal power dynamics central to the vulnerability discourse.

Unique needs, unique capacities

Both the Green New Deal and European Green Deal seek to prepare all citizens for climate change and highlight the vulnerable and frontline communities that need extra attention due to greater risk. (A visit to the [Environmental Justice Atlas](#) can provide the interested reader with a quick view of how many environmental issues disproportionately affecting marginalised communities around the world).

But what makes a community vulnerable? Why are most marginalised groups in the US blanketly labeled as such? And why the local capacities of the vulnerable communities in Europe are not clearly acknowledged, despite the fact that communities’ unique capacities to address climate change have [proved valuable](#)?

While the Green New Deal does not explicitly coalesce all groups together under the same vulnerability, it does little to distinguish the differences they face. As this is just a resolution and not a policy document, the simplicity is understandable. However, it does run the risk of adopting a “one-size-fits-all” approach that can yield poor and even detrimental results. Although the European Green Deal avoids naming the vulnerable populations, it also fails to acknowledge the local capacities and the abilities of these populations to cope with environmental change; nor does it name any socio-economic group that will likely be more adversely affected.

Take, for example, the Roma and Travellers, ethnic minorities that have faced great problems and discrimination in Europe, and, according to various EU documents,^[2] belong to the vulnerable group, along with elderly, women,

people with a disability, and the homeless, among others. Historically, these communities take on a disproportionate share of the burden of environmental harms. They often lack access to clean water; they live in areas with a high risk of flooding and heat waves. Roma and Traveller people have a strong sense of cultural resilience, community solidarity, and collective identity,^[3] and research has shown that these local networks can increase resilience to climate change.^[4]

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At the same time, the nomadic way of life of the Roma and Travellers has been a fundamental element of human history that not only builds a deeper relationship with land and nature but is also a response to seasonality and climate change. Thus, the traditional strategies of Travellers and Roma to deal with climate risk, such as transboundary mobility and pasture reserves, are an indication that these groups may not be as vulnerable as they are often considered. The travelling lifestyle has frequently met resistance from local populations. Often, EU governments have tried to stop these groups from travelling, put their children into the education system, and tried to assimilate them into mainstream society. The extensive pressures put on these nomadic groups to conform to a sedentary way of life has lacerated their original lifestyle and transformed them into marginalised communities exposed to environmental hazards.

Further North, in Norway, Finland, and Sweden, one can find the only recognised indigenous group in Europe, the Sami. An ethnic minority recognised in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, they also belong to the EU's vulnerable groups. The Sami are considered one of the most vulnerable populations to the effects of climate change by recent studies and by the Council of Europe.^[5] However, recently new results highlight that, although the Sami occupy an area highly vulnerable to climate change, they also possess valuable traditional ecological knowledge, which has helped them adapt to the changes in their environment. For instance, change in the pastureland led to new rotation and migration patterns, and new forms of communal organisation. The Sami do not fear climate change. They are more concerned with the governments' plans to construct, in the name of climate mitigation, large wind farms on traditional herding lands, and to restrict the hunting of reindeer in an effort to achieve the goals of the European Green Deal – all of which fails to acknowledge and incorporate the local capacities and needs of the Sami.

The cases of the Roma and Travellers and of the Sami are good examples of populations often labeled as vulnerable, despite the fact that their traditional way of living and their local knowledge have much to teach the world about resilience and adaptive capacity. The vulnerability label may underestimate these capacities and hinder the efforts of these communities to gain greater autonomy and sovereignty. The two groups have different histories, face different challenges, and have different needs. Thus, a homogenous label of “vulnerable” without further consideration of these differences is rather problematic. A special focus should be given to the local knowledge and lifestyle of each of these groups, and their abilities to anticipate, cope, resist, and recover from climate change.

A misleading label

In the discussion on which communities will be most at risk to the adverse impacts of climate change, the European Green Deal takes a vague approach. The text specifies that it aims to protect vulnerable citizens, workers, and rural community members. And while there is an emphasis on justice, the focus is more on workers in affected

industries than on systemic inequities. Across the Atlantic, the Green New Deal takes a much more specific approach and acknowledges that climate change, economic injustice, and environmental destruction all disproportionately affect a number of marginalised groups, labeling these as “vulnerable and frontline communities”.

While it is laudable that the Green New Deal recognises and seeks to correct historical, present, and future injustices to the marginalised groups (the European Green Deal should follow suit), the label of vulnerable, especially when coming from government, does not depict the reality of the situation. Groups assigned the label can be confused by or disagree outright with it. Roma and Travellers have a different understanding of what vulnerable means, focusing mostly on emotions, in contrast with the perspectives of vulnerability prescribed to them by people outside the community. When asked if they consider themselves vulnerable, they described vulnerability as a temporary feeling of personal suffering or wound, but not as a broader label describing their community.^[6]

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Additionally, the label risks relegating the communities’ capacities behind characteristics deemed as valid by governments. It can also encourage moral hazard behavior and be used to justify unwanted governmental intervention to “up-lift” or protect the vulnerable community.^[7] Finally, it ignores the reason for the exposure in the first place. The North American Sioux Nation was historically not threatened by the prospect of being polluted by oil. To label the Nation as vulnerable now that the protested Keystone pipeline was forced through their lands is akin to starting a fire in your bedroom and claiming your house vulnerable to being burnt down: it does not appropriately acknowledge the source of the risk. Like the other marginalised populations listed in the Green New Deal, indigenous communities are not inherently more susceptible to risk: the system has positioned them this way.

Instead of prescribing the homogenous term “vulnerable” to all marginalised groups, the Green New Deal – and similar policies worldwide – would do well to follow a trend in feminist literature that recognises vulnerability as a unifying human characteristic, and thus help wash away the stigma that often is attached to the term.^[8] Not looking at these communities as vulnerable but rather as actors on the frontline of climate change – in large part due to the effects of an unjust system – makes it easier to consider them as equitable partners in helping to fix systemic injustices for American and EU citizens (a primary goal of the Green New Deal and the European Green Deal in the first place).

Looking forward

The European Green Deal puts special focus on the citizens that will be most affected by the energy transition, such as coal miners and others working – directly or indirectly – in the coal industry. These groups have not traditionally been seen as vulnerable. On the contrary, during the past century when the coal industry was growing, these people probably never imagined they would be labeled “vulnerable”. Looking back at the New Deal of the 1930s in the US, other groups, such as farmers, faced similar uncertainties, as they saw their future threatened by proposed reforms. It seems that the aftermaths of radical policies that emerge in response to catastrophe can do much to force people into the “vulnerable” category.

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welcome collaboration would be reparations for past and current injustices, and fundamental respect of sovereignty and independence moving forward.

Both the European Green Deal and the Green New Deal aim to address some of the economic and ecological crises that humanity faces today. Both texts envision a future with reduced emissions, lower dependence on non-renewable energy, and a global temperature rise kept below 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels. These climate objectives are approachable in a semi-systematic fashion. The goals, while difficult, can be calculated and envisioned in the context of the current establishment. On issues of equity and support for frontline communities throughout this process, the path muddles somewhat. Indeed, what does “stopping current, preventing future, and repairing historic oppression” or “ensuring a just transition” look like? Climate change has predominantly been caused by and benefited those currently in power at the expense of the communities now on the frontline. Here, we do not seek to speak on behalf of the marginalised groups we are not part of, nor outline specifically what empowerment looks like for them. We do, however, hope that one of the components of the future of the Green New Deal and European Green Deal will be leadership that looks very different than it does now. It is foolish to believe that the same leadership that got us into this problem (and ignored it for so long) will successfully guide us out of it. Each frontline community has its own specific needs and capacities to build their own resilience. Their freedom to build upon and develop these capacities independent from centralised, established leadership should be respected.

The Green New Deal and the European Green Deal have good intentions and are inspired by the potential to create new forms of governance through a more just, collaborative approach. It is critical to recognise that this collaboration, for many marginalised groups, may be unwelcome at first, or at all, due to the history of the institutions leading these processes. The government should be prepared for collaboration to not always look bureaucratic. It is very likely that in some cases the most effective and welcome collaboration would be reparations for past and current injustices, and fundamental respect of sovereignty and independence moving forward.

Only by acknowledging reasons like exploitation, oppression, and the growth obsession can future policies transition towards an approach that does not aim to deal with vulnerability but to prevent it.

No matter how progressive a policy, communication, or resolution may be, it is important that the contributors do not forget who they represent and acknowledge the institutional history with the population(s) the bill addresses. New policies seeking to address social dimensions, like the European Green Deal and the Green New Deal, need to look beyond the label to the real reasons that make a group “vulnerable.” Only by acknowledging reasons like exploitation, oppression, and the growth obsession can future policies transition towards an approach that does not aim to deal with vulnerability but to prevent it, by actively involving all members of society in the policy design process. Instead of projecting preconceived labels onto populations, future texts could focus on what vulnerability really means as a lived experience in various contexts and pay more attention to power structures in contexts of risk.

Similar resolutions should continue to pay special attention to the ways in which minorities and indigenous peoples are being affected by climate change, and acknowledge the reasons behind this environmental injustice and

racism. In doing so, however, sovereignty remains an important issue. It is critical to understand how outside interventions can impact self-perceptions of vulnerability and detrimentally impose “victimicity” on populations like Roma and Travellers, as well as undermine local coping strategies, as in the case of the Sami or Sioux. An equal, historically aware dialogue will allow for continuous feedback from the local communities and institutions, respect local knowledge, capabilities, skills, talents, and technologies, and will give voice and power to marginalised groups.

[1] This is an often-referenced example: A. Oliver-Smith (1995). “Peru’s five-hundred-year earthquake: Vulnerability in historical context”. In A. Varley (Ed.), *Disasters, development and environment* (31–48). Chichester, U.K.: John Wiley.

[2] For example: “Europe 2020. A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth”. European Commission (2010), p.18. Available [here](#).

[3] Acton, T. and Mundy, G. (1997). *Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity*. Hertfordshire Press

[4] B. H. Walker, J. M. Anderies, A. P. Kinzig and P. Ryan. (2006). “Exploring resilience in social-ecological systems through comparative studies and theory development: introduction to the special issue”. *Ecology and Society* 11(1): 12.

[5] Jaakkola, JJK., Juntunen, S., Näkkäläjärvi, K. (2018). The Holistic Effects of Climate Change on the Culture, Well-Being, and Health of the Saami, the Only Indigenous People in the European Union. *Current environmental health reports* 5 (4), 401-417.

[6] V. Heaslip. 2016. “Lived experience of vulnerability from a Gypsy Roma Traveller perspective”. *JCN* (25)13-14.

[7] Wisner, 2016. “Vulnerability as Concept, Model, Metric, and Tool”. *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Natural Hazard Science*.

[8] F. D. Ni Aoláin, N. Cahn and D. Haynes (2013). “Gender, masculinities and transition in conflicted societies”. In: M. Albertson Fineman and M. Thompson (eds.). *Exploring Masculinities: Feminist Legal Theory Reflections*. Routledge: London/UK.



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Published April 10, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/vulnerability-and-the-green-new-deal-a-note-of-caution/>

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