

LAW

IN TIMES OF

GLOBAL CONFLICTS

IN A WORLD OUT OF JOINT

SPECIAL EDITION

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ERASMUS NETWORK NANTERRE

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 **Université**
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Technical Sheet

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Title: Law in Times of Global Conflicts in a World Out of Joint

Editors: Kerstin Peglow, Stephanie Dijoux, Omar Seul

Publisher: Iberojur Science Press

Layout: Mariana Dares

Cover Design: Mariana Dares

© Various Authors

Format: Electronic; File Type: PDF / PDF/A

ISBN: 978-989-36822-0-3

Legal Deposit in the Portuguese Library (DL): 562809/26

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62140/LTGCCWQJ2026>

1st Edition: Iberojur Science Press

Rua de Avilho, 214, Matosinhos (Porto) - Portugal.

March, 2026

Suggested citation: PEGLOW, Kerstin; DIJOUX, Stephanie, SEUL, Omar (eds.). *Law in Times of Global Conflicts in a World out of Joint*. Iberojur Science Press, 2026. ISBN 978-989-36822-0-3.

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**COMMON OR DIVERGENT? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN THE EUROPEAN
UNION AND THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Christian Rossi¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62140/CR530933322>

Summary: 1. Introduction; 2. Historical Background (1950s – 1990s); 3. The European Union's Sustainable Development Policy Framework; 4. The United Kingdom's Sustainable Development Policy Framework; 5. A comparative Analysis; 6. Challenges and Critiques; 7. Conclusions.

Abstract: Sustainable development policies in the United Kingdom (UK) and in the European Union (EU) have been part of selected policies that for almost fifty years have overlapped. This paper tries to trace their paths from the 1950s post-integration to recent post-Brexit policy developments. It examines major policy milestones in the European Union environmental and sustainability policies and pivotal UK instruments such as the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy, the Climate Change Act 2008, and the Environment Act 2021. Through comparative evaluation, this article highlights similarities and differences in ambition, sustainability institutions, execution, and EU–UK cooperation on shared sustainability challenges.

Key words: Sustainable Development; United Kingdom; European Union

1. INTRODUCTION

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Since the 1950s Europe has moved from post-war reconstruction to a more demanding governance framework able to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and sustainability. The concept itself of sustainable development, even if formally conceptualized in the late 1980s, has deep ideological roots dating back to the 1950s creation of the European Economic Community (EEC). The emerging idea of environmental consciousness between the 1960s and 1970s, polarized by oil crises, industrial pollution, and global initiatives such as the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment², and the Club of Rome's report "The Limits to Growth"³, gradually introduced environmental and sustainability concerns into the European policy agenda. The Brundtland Report (1987)⁴ further crystallized the idea of sustainable development as an integrated framework for balancing human and environmental needs, while movements like The Natural Step (1989)⁵ helped embed systems thinking into European policymaking. This paper examines how these historical foundations shaped both the EU's and the UK's approaches to sustainability, two approaches that from 1972 until 2016 went on together, leading to diverging trajectories after Brexit. It argues that while institutional contexts differ, both entities remain bound by shared ecological interdependence and global sustainability imperatives.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (1950S – 1990S)

² United Nations, Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 1972, <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/stockholm1972>

³ Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, William W. Behrens, The Limits to Growth. A Report from the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind, Universe Books, New York, 1972

⁴ World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Report), Our Common Future, 1987, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>

⁵ The Natural Step Foundation, The Natural Step Framework, 1989, <https://thenaturalstep.org/approach/>

Looking back at the origins of European integration in the 1950s we see that its creation was primarily economic and political, aimed at ensuring peace through cooperation, while rebuilding postwar Europe. The treaties that created the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community, paved the way to the common market. Protection of the environment, not to mention sustainability, was not a target, and the treaties institutionalized inter-governmental instruments that would later house a sustainability concept. Public concern about industrial pollution and resource depletion increased over the years, particularly in the mid-1960s, and began to urge EEC decision-making. Although formal sustainability and environmental policies were still far from emerging, discussions about pollution control and resource exploitation signaled an early awareness of cross-border environmental issues⁶. The turning point occurred in the 1970s. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm highlighted that “the natural environment and human development are closely linked together”, thus inspiring the first European Environmental Action Programme (1973–1977). That year, the Club of Rome also published “The Limits to Growth”, a report that warned about the consequences of unchecked economic expansion on environment and sustainability⁷. The subsequent year oil crisis further underscored the resource dependency fragility, encouraging initiatives such as energy diversification and environmental regulation. These progresses inspired the principle that “pollution has no borders”, which became a founding concept of the European environmental law⁸. The sustainability policy historical evolution from the 1960s onwards established introductory differences in governance attitude in shaping today’s EU–UK divergence.

⁶ Paolo Graziano, ‘The politics of the EU eco-social policies, in “European Political Science”, vol. 23, 2024, pp. 27-38.

⁷ Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, William W. Behrens, cit.

⁸ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/zero-pollution-action-plan_en

By the late 1970s and 1980s, environmental protection became a formal EEC competence, reinforced by Articles 130R–130T of the Single European Act (1986). The European Court of Justice (ECJ) played a vital role in balancing environmental objectives with market freedoms. The 1986 “Danish Bortle Case” (Case 302/86) confirmed that environmental protection could justify certain restrictions on the free movement of goods, setting a key precedent for integrating ecological and economic governance⁹.

At the global level, the 1987 Brundtland Report, named “Our Common Future”, introduced the concept of sustainability: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This concept became a guiding principle for European and UK policy frameworks alike. Around the same time, The Natural Step, founded in Sweden in 1989, promoted a science-based systems framework for sustainability that influenced Nordic and EU-level policies¹⁰. In 1990, the establishment of the European Environment Agency (EEA) institutionalized environmental monitoring and policy evaluation within the European framework, marking a critical step toward evidence-based environmental governance¹¹.

The United Kingdom’s relationship with European institutions evolved more slowly: after initial post-war ambivalence, the UK joined the EEC in 1973¹². As said, environment gained a voice in politics and decision-making process between 1970s and 1980s in the EEC Member States, thus also UK, following

⁹ Judgment of the Court of 20 September 1988 - Commission of the European Communities v Kingdom of Denmark - Free movement of goods - Containers for beer and soft drinks - Case 302/86, European Court Reports 1988 Page 04607.

¹⁰ The Natural Step Foundation, *cf.* <https://thenaturalstep.org/>

¹¹ European Environment Agency, *Sustainability transitions: now for the long term*, Publication Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2016.

¹² David Hannay (Edited by), *Britain Entry into the European Community. Report by Sir Con O’Neill on the Negotiations of 1970-1972*, Routledge, London, 2000; Stephen Wall, *The Official History of Britain and the European Community*, vol. II, *From Rejection to Referendum, 1963-1975*, Routledge, London, 2013.

industrial pollution concerns, and after the development of an international environmental diplomacy¹³. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit helped in focusing policies on sustainability and environment and the concept of sustainable development started to become a pivotal topic¹⁴.

As previously stated, the early adoption by the European Community of shared principles on environment - exemplified by the post-Stockholm Action Programmes, the legal precedent of the *Danish Bottle Case*, and the creation of the European Environment Agency – urged an inter-governmental approach towards a sustainability rooted within a rules-based system. The UK, although active in these frameworks, historically preferred more flexibility and nation-level rules with respect to rules imposed externally. Brexit confirmed the UK's rules as their rules. The EU approved the European Green Deal in an attempt of deeper integration, whilst the UK acted alone in autonomy through a domestic legal framework, thus approving the Environment Act 2021¹⁵. Yet the shared intellectual heritage of the Brundtland Report and global sustainability discourse means that both actors remain aligned on core objectives such as climate neutrality and biodiversity protection. The contrast, therefore, is less about ambition than about governance philosophy—between a multi-level system seeking harmonization and a sovereign system prioritizing national discretion. This divergence presents both risks of fragmentation and opportunities for innovative cooperation across borders.

All these historical developments collectively laid the foundation for the EU's subsequent sustainability strategies and the UK's domestic frameworks.

¹³ Sohan Tayebi, Seyyed Fazlollah Moosavi, Seyyed Abbas Poorhashemi, *Environmental Diplomacy: A Framework for Growth of International Interaction and Cooperation for Achievement of Global Peace*, in "Journal of Politics and Law", vol. 9, n. 9, 2016, pp. 150-154.

¹⁴ Jean-Frederic Morin, Jen Allan, Sikina Jinnah, *The Survival of the Weakest: The Echo of the Rio Summit Principles in Environmental Treaties*, in "Environmental Politics", vol. 33, 2024, Issue 3, pp. 486-503.

¹⁵ Environment Act 2021, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents>

3. THE EUROPEAN UNION'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY FRAMEWORK

Over the past three decades the EU developed an increasingly ambitious sustainability architecture. The Lisbon Strategy (2000) recast competitiveness alongside social and environmental renewal as central goals¹⁶, and Europe 2020 (2010) followed with measurable targets for climate and energy, employment, research, and social inclusion¹⁷. The European Green Deal (2019) marked a decisive step toward system-level transformation, setting the goal of a climate-neutral EU by 2050 and integrating circular economy, biodiversity, and just transition measures into a single political strategy¹⁸.

Institutional mechanisms underpinning EU sustainability policy include the European Commission's policy proposals, the European Parliament's legislative and budgetary role, and the Council of the EU representing member states. Policy instruments combine regulatory measures (directives and regulations), market instruments (emissions trading), funding mechanisms (Cohesion Policy, Just Transition Fund) and strategic frameworks (multiannual financial frameworks aligned with climate goals). The EU's supranational law-making capacity gives it a comparative advantage in setting transboundary regulatory standards and creating common-market incentives for green investments.

4. THE UNITED KINGDOM'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY FRAMEWORK

¹⁶ Presidency Conclusions, Lisbon European Council, 23 and 24 March 2000, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00100-1_en0.htm. Maria João Rodrigues (Edited by), Europe, Globalization and the Lisbon Agenda, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, Cheltenham, 2009.

¹⁷ European Council, Conclusions, 17 June 2010, EUCO 13/10.

¹⁸ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A new Circular Economy Action Plan. For a cleaner and more competitive Europe, 11 March 2020, COM(2020) 98 final.

The United Kingdom domestically codified sustainability commitments through successive strategies and legal instruments. The 2005 UK Sustainable Development Strategy “Securing the Future” articulated core principles—living within environmental limits, ensuring a strong healthy and just society, achieving a sustainable economy, and promoting good governance—and attempted to mainstream sustainability across departmental policies¹⁹. The Climate Change Act 2008 established a legally binding emissions’ reduction target and carbon budgeting processes, institutionalizing the Committee on Climate Change as an independent adviser²⁰.

Post-2016 and especially after Brexit, the UK’s policy architecture underwent recalibration. The Environment Act 2021 established domestic governance arrangements to replace EU-level environmental oversight, introduced legally binding environmental targets, and created the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)²¹. While the UK retained many high-level commitments—such as the net-zero by 2050 target enshrined in law in 2019—political shifts and regulatory divergence risks have raised questions about continuity, capacity, and the durability of long-term policy commitments.

5. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Given the historical framework, it is possible to compare EU and UK across four analytical dimensions: legal-institutional frameworks, policy ambition and targets, implementation and enforcement, and political economy constraints. As for the legal-institutional frameworks, the EU’s supranational competency and *acquis communautaire* provide centralized rulemaking and enforcement mechanisms

¹⁹ HM Government, *Securing the Future: Delivering UK Sustainable Development Strategy*, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by Command of Her Majesty March 2005, CM 6467.

²⁰ Climate Change Act 2008, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/27/contents>

²¹ Environment Act 2021, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents>

that produce uniform standards across member states. The UK, by contrast, has historically relied on a mix of EU-driven obligations and domestic legislation; in the post-Brexit it must reconcile sovereignty with the practicalities of cross-border environmental externalities and market alignment; Policy Ambition and climate targets of both the EU and the UK are ambitious - most notably the EU's commitment to climate neutrality by 2050 and the UK's net-zero by 2050 - yet the EU's 2019 Green Deal represented a broader systems approach linking industry, agriculture, energy, transport, and finance. The UK's targets are legally binding domestically and supported by carbon budgets, yet political contestation over the speed and distribution of transition costs has introduced volatility. The implementation and enforcement policies are in some ways different as the EU's combination of directives, regulations, and the European Court of Justice produces enforcement pressure and transnational compliance incentives, whilst UK's domestic enforcement institutions (e.g., OEP) are newer and face resource and mandate constraints. Moreover, the loss of ECJ oversight changes the enforcement dynamic and may reduce supranational dispute resolution mechanisms. If we analyze the Political Economy Constraints, we have to underline that both actors contend with industrial lobbying, regional inequalities, and concerns about competitiveness. The EU balances a large and diverse membership, generating internal negotiation costs but also broad legitimacy for collective action. The UK faces concentrated political debates, electoral cycles, and recent partisan shifts that complicate consistent long-term policymaking.

6. CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES

Key critiques of both EU and UK approaches include implementation gaps between ambition and delivery, uneven distributional impacts, and the political economy of transition. Difficulty in deciding a clear political line throughout a process can be the result of the governance system of the European Union. This leads to policy division and difficult implementation of the policies

decided at the apex within the member states. On the other hand, the regulatory divergence of the United Kingdom can cause trade clashes and can give to the environmental protection less effectualness. Moreover, institutional independence of the regulatory system, its funding and a clear accountability, is paramount for long-term commitment.

Even after Brexit process there are anyway common challenges that can be turned into an advantage for UK-EU cooperation such as climate change, loss in biodiversity and lack of resources, not to mention the supply-chain constraints. Cooperation might include mutual recognition or regulatory alignment, cross-border green infrastructures, and cooperation in research and development. Also, the third sector, civil society and local institutions may guide environmental policies with the creation of networks and shared projects.

7. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen the path followed by the European Union and by the United Kingdom on sustainable development policies have been sometimes interconnected but mostly separate. Despite an early convergence a lot of political decisions were taken at internal level and after Brexit the separation increased. In any case, as we have already seen, pollution does not follow territorial boundaries, therefore cooperation is needed to counteract. To do this, both the European Union and the United Kingdom need to act together, aligning standards of action and investing in joint and disjointed innovation so that the both of them can achieve the targets they have set for themselves in the not-so-distant future.

This article, which provides a comparative analysis of the environmental sustainability policies implemented by the United Kingdom and the European Union, demonstrates that although many of the rules approved on both sides of the Channel are the same or similar, the rationale behind their implementation has been quite different. The different system of rules is mainly due to the fact that

while on the one hand the European Economic Community, despite the belated awakening of an environmentalist conscience, has begun to apply, or at least attempt to apply, shared, coordinated rules that are valid beyond state borders and at a European level, the same has not been done by the United Kingdom. The latter, in fact, preferred to continue applying state-level rules, even after joining the EU, in order to have greater discretion and flexibility. After UK's departure from the European Union, this divergence has become more evident in spite of the share commitment to 2050 goals for sustainability.

Divergence between the rule's application emerges if we look at the practice. In the British Parliament, in fact, there were long discussion among members of Parliament during the approval of the Environment Act 2021, when most of them highlighted the possibility that the UK should use its post-Brexit freedom to set sustainability target that would be seen as an example for the world²². Both Houses of Parliament scrutinized extensively the bill, and they truly acted as a forum for accountability, demanding clearer legal bases, stronger independent control (such as the role of the Office for Environmental Protection), and sharper implementation passages. The result has often been an overlapping of rules between the UK and the European Union²³. It is thus possible to draw several conclusions: The first aspect concerns the credibility of the European Union as a supranational entity capable of creating superior legislation, the power of intervene of the Court of Justice of the European Union, and not least the EU environmental acquis valid in the whole of the European member states. The United Kingdom in comparison to the European Union should act in the same way within its border and with the same binding capacity. Parliamentary discussions in Westminster show awareness and concern about this possibility and about the future. Moreover,

²² Hansard, The Official Record of Parliamentary Debates (House of Lords, d'ora in poi: HL; House of Commons, d'ora in poi: HC), 2021, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>, HL, 7 June 2021, vol. 812.

²³ Hansard, HC, 20 October 2021, vol. 701.

the European Union, as well as the United Kingdom share a similar path towards the climate neutrality by 2050, about biodiversity and sustainability. Ambition, unfortunately, does not guarantee success. British MPs have been very clear on this point, because a distant goal without intermediate steps risks failing to deliver the desired result. The European Union faces similar problems because, for the United Kingdom, the intermediate steps within Europe are the member states, who must in turn apply the rules. Ambition, therefore, it does not seem the problem whilst monitoring and enforcement are.

Another aspect to underline is that European control over British rules, which ceased after Brexit, has caused and will cause even greater divergence in the future. Or a greater innovation. Governments and parliamentarians in Hansard acknowledge that freedom to diverge must be matched by safeguards to prevent regulatory weakening (for example, on imports produced under lower standards). The EU, meanwhile, continues to rely on harmonised standards and internal market leverage. The key question is whether the UK will choose divergence in order to outperform (regulatory competition) or to drift (regulatory dilution). For sustainability, neither outcome is automatically preferable: divergence may drive innovation, but misaligned standards raise risks for cross-border environmental externalities. On the other hand, despite institutional divergence, the ecological realities remain shared. The principle that ‘pollution knows no borders’, which informed early EU environmental law, remains valid for the UK in a post-Brexit context: air and water pollution cross boundaries, supply chains interlink, and climate change is global and transnational. It means that the UK emphasises international responsibilities (e.g., deforestation in commodity supply-chains) as part of domestic law²⁴. Therefore, the comparative analysis suggests that the EU and UK are best served by coordinated but distinct approaches: UK pursuing sovereign frameworks but aligned sufficiently with EU and multilateral standards

²⁴ Hansard, HC, 26 May 2021, vol. 696.

to avoid fragmentation; EU maintaining internal cohesion while enabling external partnerships.

In conclusion, the comparative historical-institutional unfolding of sustainability policy in the EU and UK provides important lessons for the next decade. The UK, now fully autonomous from the EU, faces the challenge of constructing a credible, enforceable, and ambitious sustainability framework at home, while managing alignment with external actors. The UK and EU have historical convergences in aims and values; the critical test is whether their divergent ways can still bring similar outcomes. In an era of shared climate and environmental risk, interdependence or divergence highlight that cooperation in sustainable development is paramount. And meaningful to all.