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The Human–Nature Relationship at The Heart of the Green Transition

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PHOENIX

The contemporary world confronts us with unprecedented socio–ecological transformation processes that threaten life on Earth, human and non–human, as we know it, making global societal and human collapse and even extinction a very likely and little explored possibility.

We are witnessing **several interconnected socio-ecological phenomena**, from the loss of biodiversity to extinctions, food shortages, and lack of food security, caused by population increase, hunger, drought, lack of water, sealing, depletion, and destruction of soils, deforestation, fires, a general increase in temperatures and subsequent impact, among many others, on the melting of the polar ice caps.

The relationships of interdependence and inter-influence between Nature and society/culture are undeniable, but **historically the human/Nature coexistence has not been peaceful**. When the civilizational leap is measured by the greater or lesser distance from Nature, its domain and use.

The further away we are from it, the more we would be seen and understood as less savage and more civilized. **Nature has been at our disposal as our reservoir of resources, ready to serve us**. From the very beginning, the Natural world has been understood as the great opposition to the civilized world with its social structures.

In the scope of the European Green Deal transition pathway, the challenge is simultaneously to find ways that respond to these socio-ecological contemporary challenges and articulate what is disjointed: nature and its movements, its biophysical dynamics with the socio-cultural systems, in an interconnected, interdependent and articulated way.

The big challenge is not leaving anyone behind, so that everyone, together with the non-human elements of our common home, can build fully sustainable socio-ecological futures. It is recognised as a central need to integrate and consider the sociocultural specificities in each territory and the diversity of visions of Humans-Nature relations. The biggest challenge remains exactly how to make this work.

The **Societies and Environmental Sustainability research line** team at the **Centre for Functional Ecology – Science for People & the Planet of the University of Coimbra** (CFE-UC) aims to develop and promote a multidisciplinary vision that considers all forms of knowledge, from local to scientific in co-production processes including all actors, all narratives in emancipatory agendas supported by mechanisms of participation.

In the need to reframe society-nature bonds, these are the reasons why, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in **the role that democratic mechanisms of innovation can play when building sustainable futures**. This is in part due to the recognition of the importance of natural elements in sustaining social, cultural, environmental, and economic development.

As much as the need to overcome the limitations inherent to the assumption that natural elements are a subaltern part of the play, such as when they manifest themselves through extreme events, for instance, where they assume the central role. That is the main reason that requires putting Nature and its elements side by side and sometimes even above other elements that made the socio-ecological scenario a relevant one, where **participation is a central process to bring all voices into the needed social transformation**.

The need to understand society-nature relations beyond the management of natural elements is because **it is fundamental to understand how societies interact with and understand the natural world**. It is about the values, norms, and institutions that shape our relationship with nature, and how these can be used to support more democratic and sustainable forms of development. Since society-nature relations are complex and constantly evolving, **democratic innovation helps us to deal with this complexity by allowing us to experiment with new ways of decision-making** and to change our relationship with the natural environment.

The PHOENIX project promotes in-depth analysis of different typologies of democratic innovation and their concrete translation into sound practices on diverse territories, by **identifying how Society and Nature relate in 11 pilots distributed by 7 countries** (Portugal, Spain, France, Iceland, Italy, Hungary, Estonia).

Partners:



Written by:



Fátima Alves
Senior Researcher at the CFE - Centre for Functional Ecology, University of Coimbra



Diogo Guedes Vidal
Researcher at the CFE - Centre for Functional Ecology, University of Coimbra

A part of the PHOENIX consortium, the **Societies and Environmental Sustainability research line** is dedicated to contributing to a transformational change, starting from the fact that contemporary socio-ecological challenges can only be addressed through new forms of social organization and participation.

CFE-UC coordinates the Portugal-Spain cross-border pilot, a regional project that comprises the municipalities of Penamacor and Sabugal, integrating the cross-border region of Serra da Gata and Malcata on the Portuguese side; and the municipalities of San Martin, Trevejo, Elias, Hoyos, Torre Don Miguel, Molhedo de Gata, which are part of the cross-border region of Serra da Gata and Malcata, on the Spanish side.

In this pilot, CFE-UC will organize **workshops involving different actors and populations in preparation for the socio-ecological transition**, which will allow gathering information to draw work plans more suited to the local socio-ecological, economic, and cultural idiosyncrasies.

With PHOENIX, **the biggest expectation lies in the possibility to change the course of traditional citizen participation towards the ecological transition**, by implementing a transformative policy based on in-depth knowledge of the biophysical and socio-economic-cultural characteristics of the territories that articulates the plurality of knowledge, powers, and local positions.

As CFE-UC, and together with PHOENIX partners, we will develop a set of 5 interconnected tasks with the main objective of contributing to **rethinking the socio-environmental participation models and promoting a fair and inclusive ecological transition** that goes beyond the current democratic participation models:

- 1) Understand the sociocultural construction of Nature and Environment and to what extent different meanings of it can condition the implementation of EGD's measures;
- 2) Identify how societies and individuals relate, use, and re-signify Nature and the Environment through sociocultural values, lived experience, and political-economic institutions;
- 3) Problematize the concepts of Nature and Environment, and other related concepts such as cultural ecosystem services and their relation to climate change, social inequalities, health, and well-being;
- 4) Design a theoretical framework to contribute to the identification of the best methodological approach for the deliberative and participatory processes developed throughout the project;
- 5) Design a comprehensive methodology for ongoing monitoring and impact evaluation, and the participatory/deliberative methods developed by pilots.

Citizens' voices are the beating heart of democracy, so a strong and vibrant democracy depends on the full and active participation of all its citizens. Therefore, the CFE-UC team considers that by highlighting the processes of good governance and citizen participation and ensuring supportive involvement in environmental decisions it is possible to enhance a transformative policy that involves local communities, giving them a voice and empowerment toward a positive and viable democratic future in a sustainable home planet. This is what shapes our participation at PHOENIX.

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For a democratic and participatory green transition

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info@phoenix-horizon.eu