

ATWOOD'S PRACTICAL UTOPIAS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

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Abstract: *This article compares Margaret Atwood's Practical Utopia – an interactive, global, live-learning workshop hosted on the Disco platform – with the European Green Deal (EGD) to examine how imaginative, community-led futures align with and operationalise the EU's policy architecture for climate neutrality. Using content analysis, document analysis, and comparative analysis, the study advances the hypothesis that contemporary "practical utopias" are shaped by EGD targets and strategies, and tests that claim against the project's themes and outcomes, including the Symbiocene showcase.*

The paper situates Practical Utopias within currents of “real” or “concrete” utopianism (Wright, Albritton, Wilder), where ideals are judged by feasibility and iterative prototyping. Atwood's pivot from dystopia to practice foregrounds active hope: participants co-designed carbon-neutral/negative communities by tackling basic systems (food, shelter, clothing, energy, mobility, governance, digital infrastructure, justice, and rituals around death) while interrogating the ecological ethics of enabling technologies. In parallel, the article synthesises the EGD's core—climate neutrality by 2050, ≥55% emissions cuts by 2030, and a policy suite spanning circular economy, zero pollution, Farm to Fork, Renovation Wave, industrial decarbonisation, clean mobility, renewables and hydrogen, biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration—plus recent dynamics.

Findings indicate five zones of convergence: ecology and sustainability, social justice and inclusion, education and co-creation, technological ethics, and mobilising hope. A structured mapping (Table 3.1 in the article) translates the EGD pillars into the practices of Symbiocene, the winning group project in Margaret Atwood's Practical Dystopias. This alignment suggests complementarity. EGD supplies the regulatory scaffolding, finance, and market signals, while Practical Utopias/Symbiocene supplies the cultural grammar, social protocols, and local prototypes that translate targets into lived routines.

The article contributes an analytical bridge between policy and imagination-as-infrastructure. By showing how Symbiocene's bottom-up prototypes can accelerate local uptake of EGD objectives, while EGD mitigates risks of fragmentation through standards and solidarity mechanisms, the study frames a two-way synergy: 1. rules enable experiments to scale; 2. experiments render rules legitimate and desirable. It concludes that success in the green transition is as much a question of collective will and narrative resonance as of technology and law; pairing EGD's institutional power with Practical Utopias' participatory pedagogy offers a pragmatic pathway from aspiration to implementation.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; Practical Utopias; European Green Deal; global communities

Introduction

In contemporary social theory, the concept of "practical utopias" represents a way of envisioning realistic social transformations that strike a balance between idealism and practical feasibility. This concept overlaps with the idea of "real utopias", clearly formulated by sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2010), which argues that democratic, egalitarian and viable institutions can constitute real alternatives to the inequitable structures of capitalism¹. Wright substantiates this approach by offering numerous examples of pragmatic social institutions, such as Wikipedia and the Mondragón corporation, which are considered models of an inclusive and democratic social economy. In addition to real manifestations, Wright's *The Real Utopias Project* (organised through workshops) explores institutions such as secondary associations, efficient redistribution, fundamental income guarantees, deliberative governance, and other democratic structures – all with transformative potential².

Robert Albritton proposes a theoretical perspective on practical utopias as a process of generative reflection: short-term interventions can be strategically oriented towards more profound and desired long-term transformations³. This vision responds to a contemporary need: identifying realistic actions that do not compromise the ambition for a more just society.

Gary Wilder analyses "concrete utopianism", which identifies and develops emergent alternative arrangements within existing structures, and their practice catalyses social change⁴.

In the field of architecture and urban design, practical utopias are materialised through integrated, sustainable and recreational urban projects — called "thick", "fun" and "green" — intended to rapidly transform urban spaces without compromising functionality and social cohesion⁵.

Practical Utopias reflects a key direction in modern social theory: the merging of utopia with implementability, and reminds us that ideals are not just abstractions, but can be operational guides to real justice, equality, and democracy.

The present paper analyses a recent Practical Utopia in comparison to the European Green Deal, starting from the research hypothesis that the thinking and imagination of the global community are inspired when imagining a possible future by the targets and strategies of the European Green Deal. Atwood's Practical Utopias was a collective project developed in 2022 on the learning platform Disco. The present study employs a research methodology that combines content analysis, document analysis, and comparative analysis. The paper is divided into three

¹ Eric Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Verso, New York, 2010.

² *Real Utopias Project*. Retrieved 10.06.2025 from <https://www.realutopiasproject.com/>

³ Robert Albritton, *Eco-Socialism For Now and the Future: Practical Utopias and Rational Action*, Palgrave, 2019.

⁴ Gary Wilder, 13 Concrete Utopias, 13 seminars to Columbia, Retrieved 10.06.2025 from <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/utopia1313/?cn-reloaded=1>

⁵ Richard Westra, Robert Albritton and Seongjin Jeong (eds), *Varieties of Alternative Economic Systems – Practical Utopias for an Age of Global Crisis and Austerity*, London: Routledge, 2017

sections: the first presents Margaret Atwood's discussion of a collaborative project with the Disco platform, the second provides some general coordinates of the European Green Deal, necessary for the intended comparison, and the last section is dedicated to the comparison itself.

1. Margaret Atwood's *Practical Utopias*

Margaret Atwood, renowned for her signature dystopias – including *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy – has taken a significant step forward with the *Practical Utopias* project, an interactive virtual workshop developed in collaboration with the Disco platform. This approach marks a paradigm shift, from the dire, bleak image of the future that dystopias anticipate, to the imaginative exploration of collective and viable alternatives. Atwood stated that the role of the *Practical Utopias* project was to answer the question: "Why don't you write utopias?" and, rather than formulating a completely utopian fiction—often devoid of conflict—she chose to build realistic, optional social models with a community to counter pessimism and mobilise active hope⁶.

Practical Utopias was an experimental virtual workshop led by Margaret Atwood and hosted on the Disco platform. Structured as a live course, it brought together participants from around the world, assembled in eight teams, according to Atwood, to imagine future communities that were carbon-neutral or even negative, equitable, and sustainable⁷.

The project set out to ask fundamental questions: what will we eat, and how will food be produced? Where will we live, from what materials? What will we wear in a highly polluting fashion industry? How will we produce energy? How will we manage transportation, governance, wealth distribution, health, gender equality, diversity, culture and education? Including less common questions — about the internet (and its energy consumption), law enforcement, justice, security, waste management and even funeral ceremonies (where cremation produces large amounts of CO₂). Disco facilitated the combination of knowledge, hope and collective will in the face of the climate and social emergency⁸.

⁶ Margaret Atwood, (2022, octombrie 19). *Margaret Atwood: Why I write dystopias*, October 19 2022, retrieved 09.06.2025 from <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2022/10/margaret-atwood-dystopias>

⁷ Disco.co, *Practical Utopias: An Exploration of the Possible with Margaret Atwood*, retrieved 01.06.2025 from <https://atwood.disco.co/>

⁸ Cristina Matilda Vănoagă, personal archive.



MATERIAL WORLDS	SOCIAL WORLDS
Shelter	Education
Water	Health
Food	Gender Equality
Clothing	Arts & Culture
Electricity	Governance
Transportation	Communication
Waste	Wealth & Financial Systems
Death & Human Remains	Faith & Spirituality

Image 1.1 Atwood's Practical Utopias: Themes of Discussion

Source: [Practical Utopias Learning Community - Dashboard](#)

The Disco platform was designed as a live education system, providing integrated tools for creating, delivering, and scaling courses taught in live communities. Initially, the Practical Utopias project was offered blockchain-based NFT certificates, but Atwood initially opposed it on environmental grounds; the Tezos blockchain, which consumes much less energy, was later chosen⁹. This explains the innovative nature of the project, which combines participatory and collaborative education with reflection on technological ethics and emerging limits.

Margaret Atwood built her artistic career on dystopias — a choice motivated by the inertia of the utopian idea, which had long worn thin in the 20th century. She tells us that literary utopias became difficult to achieve after the 20th century's utopian dreams generated massive dictatorships (the USSR, Nazism), transforming ideals into nightmares. Therefore, writing literary utopias seemed impossible, while dystopias, full of conflict, had a straightforward narrative utility.

However, Atwood wondered whether it was necessary to give up hope. Thus, Practical Utopias emerged as a response to the public demand to offer "a

⁹ Kate Knibbs, Margaret Atwood is ready to let it rip, March 7 2023, retrieved 01.06.2025 from <https://www.wired.com/story/margaret-atwood-interview/>

little hope": not through ideal utopian fiction, but through practical, applicable ideas for institutional and social reconfiguration (in the form of a live educational prototype). Through this project, Atwood demonstrates the shift from contemplating dystopias to co-creating essential, pragmatic utopias, pursued in the community¹⁰.

The Practical Utopias workshop featured live, virtual sessions in which Atwood guided participants, along with invited experts, in building sustainable social models. Using multidisciplinary tools, teams worked on key themes: future agriculture, sustainable habitats, green energy, egalitarian mobility, participatory governance, social equity, sustainable arts and culture, justice systems, education, and ethical digital infrastructure.

This structure was intended to break the silos of knowledge: many experts were unaware of what others had discovered. At the end of the workshop, some of the output—reflections, plans, and prototypes—was organised in digital form (including Tezos NFT certificates), generating a communal and collective product, rather than a singular or imposed one. The goal was to exchange ideas and develop an educational prototype of structural hope in times of complex crisis.

The project, according to Atwood, was more successful than expected, with hundreds of participants, in-depth interdisciplinary discussions, and a visible, reflective impact. However, he stressed the need for collective will — in a metaphor inspired by the show *Survivorman*, the survival of the human species requires: knowledge, proper equipment, will and luck. The only significant lack at the moment is will, but without hope, there is no action — the project was built precisely to stimulate collective will and hope.

The approach to NFTs was also a critical and ethical one: initially rejected, later adopted on a more climate-friendly platform — Tezos — this reflects an active sensitivity to the ecological impact of technology (NFT, blockchain)¹¹

The *Practical Utopias* project places Margaret Atwood in the role of facilitator of hope, mobilising the global community to think about and implement structural solutions, not ideal fictions. By collaborating with Disco, Atwood has created a hybrid framework between education, climate activism, and democratic utopia. The spirit is not naive, but realistic: involvement, will, awareness, and action are the tools through which utopias can become reality.

2. A General Presentation of the European Green Deal

The European Green Deal (EGD) is the policy package adopted by the European Union (EU) to transform the EU economy into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive one, with a view to achieving climate neutrality by 2050¹². Launched in December 2019, this ambitious plan responds to growing

¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, (2022, octombrie 19). *Margaret Atwood: Why I write dystopias*

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, 2019, retrieved 06.06.2025 from European Commission website: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

pressure from civil society, and in particular from younger generations, calling for strong policies against climate change¹³.

The European Green Deal is based on a coherent set of interconnected objectives. At its core is climate neutrality by 2050, with an intermediate step of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels¹⁴. This transition is supported by measures to accelerate the circular economy and decarbonisation in key sectors such as energy, industry, buildings, transport, agriculture and biodiversity¹⁵. The Green Deal also includes the Zero Pollution Plan, which aims to eliminate air, water and soil pollution by 2050¹⁶. Another central component is the Farm to Fork strategy, which promotes a sustainable and healthy food system, aiming to reduce the use of pesticides and fertilisers substantially by 2030.¹⁷ In financial terms, the InvestEU package, estimated at over 1 trillion euros, together with the Just Transition Mechanism, provides resources for the regions most affected by the green transition¹⁸.

The EU aims to reform heavy industries, such as steel and cement, by promoting clean production and encouraging the development of sustainable products with extended lifespans. These measures are complemented by reducing material waste and encouraging widespread recycling¹⁹.

The construction and building renovation sector is also a key component. The stated objective is to triple the current renovation rate of buildings, aiming to reduce energy consumption and associated emissions. This direction is motivated by the fact that buildings generate a significant percentage of energy consumption and emissions at the European level²⁰.

Regarding transport and mobility, the focus is on reducing emissions, developing smart mobility and deploying electric vehicles. In parallel, urban infrastructure needs to be redesigned to integrate efficient and clean transport systems. In the energy field, EGD involves the transition to renewable sources, the integration of energy markets and the development of clean hydrogen infrastructure, while placing an increased emphasis on energy efficiency²¹.

In terms of biodiversity and ecosystems, the Green Deal aims to protect 30% of the EU's land and sea territory and plant three billion trees by 2030, as well as restore waterways and degraded ecosystems²².

Although the European Green Deal is not a legislative act in itself, it acts as a strategic framework. Its implementation involves the revision of existing

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ European Commission, *Communication on the European Green Deal*, 2020, retrieved 06.06.2025 from https://www.esdn.eu/fileadmin/ESDN_Reports/ESDN_Report_2_2020.pdf

¹⁶ European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, 2019.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

legislation and the introduction of new regulations, such as the European Climate Law and the “Fit for 55” package, designed to bring European legislation in line with the assumed objectives²³. In financial terms, the Just Transition Mechanism aims to ensure a fair distribution of costs and to support regions dependent on polluting industries, in order to reduce social and economic tensions generated by the imposed transformations²⁴.

The report published in January 2025 by the World Economic Forum confirms that the European Green Deal remains the central policy framework for achieving climate neutrality by 2050, while also emphasising the role of the private sector in supporting the transition²⁵. In February 2024, the European Commission proposed an even more ambitious interim target of reducing emissions by 90% by 2040²⁶. The 2024 edition of the European Green Deal Barometer also highlights the transformation of all economic sectors in line with green objectives and reveals that this transformation has a positive impact on the well-being of the population²⁷.

The European Green Deal represents a complex and ambitious strategic framework for the sustainable transformation of the European economy. It combines the objectives of climate neutrality, economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection in an integrated vision. Its effectiveness, however, depends on the rigorous implementation of the legislation, the allocation of sufficient financial resources and the Union's capacity to balance the divergent socio-economic interests of the Member States. In the context of the multiple crises facing Europe, the Green Deal remains not only an ecological plan but also a strategy for resilience and strengthening the European project.

3. A comparison between the European Green Deal and the results of the *Practical Utopias* project

Comparing EGD and Atwood's *Practical Utopias*—an institutional initiative that is policy-oriented and an artistic and educational one—offers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of how modern societies articulate their visions of the future. In what follows, we will argue that EGD and *Practical Utopias* converge in five central areas: ecology and sustainability, social justice and

²³ Sikora, A. (2020). European Green Deal – legal and financial challenges. *Polish Yearbook of International Law*, 40, 2020, pp. 15–40, retrieved 08.06.2025 from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7607896/>

²⁴ European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, 2019.

²⁵ World Economic Forum, *Delivering on the European Green Deal: A Private Sector Perspective – Second Edition*, retrieved 08.06.2025 from <https://www.weforum.org/publications/delivering-on-the-european-green-deal-a-private-sector-perspective-second-edition/>

²⁶ European Movement, *Delivering a Strong European Green Deal in Stormy Times*, retrieved 08.06.2025 from <https://europeanmovement.eu/policy/delivering-a-strong-european-green-deal/>

²⁷ European Green Deal Barometer, *European Green Deal Barometer, Fourth Edition – Executive Summary*, March 2024, retrieved 08.06.2025 from <https://ieep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Green-Deal-Barometer-2024-Executive-Summary.pdf>

inclusion, the role of education and co-creation, technological ethics, responding to pessimism and mobilising hope.

In terms of ecology and sustainability, EGD is anchored in measurable objectives: climate neutrality by 2050, reducing emissions by 55% by 2030, expanding renewable energy networks, protecting biodiversity by restoring ecosystems, and reducing pollution to zero by 2050²⁸. Strategies such as “Farm to Fork” or “Renovation Wave” are concrete, technical tools that aim to reduce dependence on polluting resources²⁹.

During the Symbiocene Showcase³⁰, the participants in *Practical Utopias* discuss scenarios on how future communities can become carbon negative, utilising local resources, renewable building materials, and circular technologies. Imagination becomes a tool for prototyping ecological models. The similarities with EGD are obvious: both initiatives recognise that the future can only be imagined in a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment.

In relation to social justice and inclusion, EGD, through the Just Transition Mechanism, resources are allocated to regions dependent on coal or polluting industries so that workers are not abandoned in the transition process³¹ (Jaeger, 2021). The emphasis on “leaving no one behind” reflects a recognition of the ethical and political dimension of transformation.

During Practical Utopias Showcase Day 2, participating groups proposed models of participatory governance, equitable resource redistribution, and solutions to combat structural inequalities. Atwood emphasises gender equality, equal access to education and health, and cultural diversity. Like EGD, the utopian project recognises that ecology without social justice is incomplete.³²

With regards to education and co-creation, EGD includes the European Climate Pact, designed to mobilise citizens, NGOs and the private sector in an educational and participatory process³³. However, the EU’s educational mechanisms are indirect, focused on policies, grants and partnerships.

In contrast, *Practical Utopias* was itself an educational process. The Disco platform facilitates live, interdisciplinary collaboration between participants who together imagine what a sustainable community could look like. Thus, education is not a secondary component, but the central method. Atwood transforms utopia from a literary text into an exercise in collective pedagogy.

²⁸ European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, 2019, retrieved 01.06.2025 from https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

²⁹ European Environmental Bureau, *The European Green Deal: Knowledge Brief.*, 2025, retrieved 01.06.2025 from <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/The-European-Green-Deal-Knowledge-Brief.pdf>

³⁰ YouTube. *Margaret Atwood's Practical Utopias: Symbiocene Showcase*. Retrieved 06.06.2025 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5Vw9OUdVhs>

³¹ Jaeger, C., *The European Green Deal – More than climate neutrality*, in *Intereconomics*, 56(2), 99–104, 2021, retrieved 10.06.2025 from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-021-0966-y>

³² YouTube. *Margaret Atwood's Practical Utopias Showcase Day 2*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZgEeis7Rc0>

³³ European Commission, *The European Green Deal*

In relation to technological ethics and digital sustainability, EGD recognises the role of green technologies and digitalisation, but draws attention to their ecological and social costs. Clean energy, green hydrogen, energy efficiency and responsible digitalisation are essential elements.³⁴

Atwood has directly confronted the issue of technological ethics by opting to abandon polluting blockchain-based NFTs in favour of a more climate-friendly solution, Tezos. In Practical Utopias, questions about the energy consumption of the internet, the recycling of digital materials, and the sustainability of the fashion industry demonstrate the same sensitivity.

Responding to pessimism and mobilising hope, EGD has been criticised for its ambitions, with some commentators calling it insufficient or too costly. However, it represents a politics of hope, a framework for avoiding climate collapse.

Atwood, known for her dystopias, made the move to practical utopias in response to the public necessity for hope. She stated for the fellows in the Practical Utopias Project: “There isn’t ‘the future’ that we’re doomed to enact. There are all kinds of possible futures. And which one we’re going to get is going to depend on what we do now”³⁵.

If we analyse the winning project, Symbiocene, we can observe numerous points of convergence with the European Green Deal, presented in Table 3.1, for better visibility.

Common element	European Green Deal	Symbiocene
Decarbonisation targets	European Climate Law: climate neutrality by 2050; $\geq 55\%$ reduction by 2030; sectoral trajectories and reporting.	Local targets and community carbon budgets, as well as civic commitments and municipal pacts, on a 10-year horizon.
Emissions signal for buildings & transport	ETS/ETS2: carbon price via fuel suppliers; efficiency and electrification measures.	Behaviour change, neighbourhood-scale electrification, microgrids; avoids fiscal tools, relies on social norms and local infrastructure.
Social protection of the transition	Social Climate Fund: Just Transition Mechanisms for Vulnerable Households and SMEs.	Cooperatives, co-ownership of infrastructure, community social tariffs, time banks, mutualism.
Circular economy & ecodesign	Circular Economy Action Plan; right to repair; durability	Repair workshops, libraries of things, local

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ Margaret Atwood, Disco Platform, retrieved 04.06.2025 from <https://atwood.disco.co/p/community/dashboard>.

	standards; waste prevention.	reuse/recycling, design for "zero waste."
Sustainable food systems	Farm to Fork: short supply chains, food-waste reduction, health and equity standards.	Urban gardens, local markets, neighbourhood composting, nutritional cascading; "zero food waste."
Biodiversity & restoration	Biodiversity Strategy 2030; Nature Restoration Law with binding targets.	"Multispecies" city, green-blue corridors, co-design with nature via replicable micro-projects.
Zero pollution (air–water–soil)	Zero Pollution Action Plan; limits/standardisation, monitoring.	Closing water/nutrient loops; non-toxic materials; source prevention through community design.
Building renovation & efficiency	Renovation Wave, EPBD, and Funding for Deep Retrofits.	Participatory renovations, bio-based materials, low-tech/low-energy housing, community worksites.
Sustainable mobility	Sustainable & Smart Mobility Strategy; infrastructure and standards.	15-minute city, active mobility, traffic-calmed streets, last-mile logistics, community car-sharing.
Renewable energy & system integration	Renewable Energy Directive (RED), system integration, storage and smart grids.	Energy communities, micro-generation, demand management and distributed storage.
Hydrogen for hard-to-electrify sectors	EU Hydrogen Strategy: prioritisation in industry/heavy transport.	Selective/niche use; preference for direct electrification and low-tech processes.
Net-zero industrial policy	Net-Zero Industry Act: EU capacity for net-zero technologies; accelerated permitting.	Local micro-manufacturing, maker spaces, bio-fabrication; autonomy via small-scale and civic networks.
Critical raw materials & material resilience	Critical Raw Materials Act: targets for extraction/processing/recycling; reduced dependencies.	Reduced "material diet," bio-based substitutes, neighbourhood-scale recycling, and short supply chains.
Trade & carbon leakage	CBAM: border adjustment to equalise carbon costs at import.	Relocalising essential production; shortening value chains to avoid

		leakage.
Governance & participation	Consultations, national/regional plans, and formal stakeholder engagement.	Municipal co-governance, citizens' assemblies, co-design and social prototyping.
Climate adaptation & nature-based solutions (NBS)	Adaptation strategy; funded/regulated NBS.	Micro-forests, shading, surface permeability, rainwater capture, community-led phytoremediation.
Water (quality & circularity)	Targets under Zero Pollution/Farm to Fork/Water Framework; standards and monitoring.	Local greywater loops, rainwater harvesting, recirculation and decentralised management.
Waste & resources	Collection/recycling targets; extended producer responsibility.	Neighborhood-level zero waste; repair, reuse, composting, community workshops.

Table 3.1 European Green Deal to Symbiocene Mapping

Source: Author's conception

Conclusions

We have illustrated how Atwood made the transition from dystopias to a practical utopian project, described the architecture of the platform and the form of the program, and emphasised the epistemic and civic impact of the approach. Practical Utopias confirms the belief in the power of collective imagination, combined with will, to generate viable alternatives to the current world.

The European Green Deal and Practical Utopias converge in the same direction: building a sustainable, equitable and imaginative future. If the first is the expression of institutional and legislative power, the second is the expression of collective imagination and active hope. Together, the two models show us that a sustainable future is built not only through policies, but also through community exercises of imagination.

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