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## ► To cite this version:

François-Mathieu Poupeau. Defending the climate cause within the state: the ministry of ecology and the drafting of France's national low-carbon strategy (2017–2020). Environmental Politics, 2024, 10.1080/09644016.2024.2386795 . halshs-04789142

**HAL Id: halshs-04789142**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04789142v1>**

Submitted on 25 Nov 2024

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**Defending the climate cause within the State:  
the Ministry of Ecology and the drafting of France’s National Low-Carbon Strategy  
(2017-2020)**

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Published in *Environmental Politics*, 2024, 1-23 (doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2024.2386795)

## INTRODUCTION

For several years now, the IPCC reports have been reminding us of the global community’s inability to achieve the GHG reduction targets needed to fight climate change in the long term. Researchers have put forward several factors to explain this difficulty: the limits of global governance arrangements (Vogler, 2016), the characteristics of the capitalist system and neo-liberalism (Fremstad, Paul, 2022), the way international trade works (Walters, 2020), the strategies used by major companies exploiting or consuming fossil fuels (Ferns, Amaeshi, 2021; Brulle, 2022), and corporate and individual inertia (Dunlap, Brulle, 2015; Hornsey, Fielding, 2020; Judik, 2018; Dubash, 2022).

To meet the challenges raised by this major issue, public institutions and governance are decisive levers, playing a key role in the adoption of measures likely to durably influence stakeholders’ attitudes. As the IPCC (2014) points out, institutions exert a triple influence, “set[ting] the incentive structure for economic decision making, (...) shap[ing] the political context for decision making [and] shap[ing] patterns of thinking and understanding of policy choices” (IPCC, 2014, 1149-1150). Governance, for its part, plays a complementary role, since the ability of stakeholders to mobilize around shared objectives depends to a large extent on the quality of the arrangements and modes of coordination, especially between institutions.

While academic literature has clearly shown that given their systemic and cross-cutting nature, climate issues need to be addressed from a multi-level institutional governance perspective (Saerbek et alii, 2017; Wurzel et alii, 2019), states keep a fundamental responsibility in the search for solutions. This level concentrates key resources –political, legal, regulatory, financial and symbolic– liable to promote sustainable solutions to the problems encountered (Duit et alii, 2016; *Environmental Politics*, 2021; Dubash et alii, 2022). However, State capacity for action is not automatic and does not depend solely on the existence of more or less significant and well-distributed means of action. It relies above all on the ability of those in power to combine and mobilize such resources in order to define and implement long-term policies. In these processes, the administrations in charge of climate issues play a key role, which consists of defending their cause within a bureaucratic arena that is not always in its favor and is subject to centrifugal interests and forces (Meckling, Nahm, 2018; Tosun, Howlett, 2021; Finnegan, 2022; Wellstead, Briesbroek, 2022). The present paper examines this type of player through the prism of “administrative capacity” (McAdam et alii, 2001), quite little studied from the point of view of internal state relations in the literature on climate change to date. Our hypothesis is that the capacity for action conceded or achieved by climate administrations is an essential factor in the ability of states to fight against climate change.

To illustrate this, we take the example of the French “National Low-Carbon Strategy” (SNBC), published in March 2020, a document that puts forward a trajectory for lowering GHG emissions to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Drafted in 2015 by the TECV law<sup>1</sup>, the SNBC consists of a decree setting carbon budgets in five-year increments and by sector (transport,

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<sup>1</sup> *Loi relative à la transition énergétique pour la croissance verte* (TECV, law on energy transition for green growth), passed on August 17, 2015.

housing, industry, agriculture, etc.) over the period 2019-2033, together with a voluminous report (192 pages) delivering an assessment of the situation and incorporating measures to be taken to meet the commitments set by the government. The production of this document, which lasted three years (2017-2020), needed considerable administrative work, overseen by the Ministry of Ecology and its “*département de lutte contre l’effet de serre*” (DLCES, Department for combating the greenhouse effect), in liaison with the stakeholders and other administrations concerned. The text –a roadmap for climate policy– is a good analyzer of the administration’s ability to exist within the political-administrative system and, consequently, to enable the State to set a course and to mobilize all the different stakeholders around it.

Based on an empirical investigation using the “bureaucratic politics” approach (Allison, 1971), we show that the administration responsible for drawing up the SNBC –and therefore for defending the climate cause within the State– found itself in a position of powerlessness due to three main factors: instrumental (the limited scope of the SNBC tool, reflecting an initial determination to reduce its influence), organizational (the subordinate position of the administration in charge of climate within the bureaucratic hierarchy), and political (the weak support it enjoyed from government officials). The result was a fragile and contested strategy, unlikely to bring about lasting change.

To conduct this analysis, we divide the paper into two parts. After briefly outlining our theoretical framework and methodology, we highlight the three sets of factors mentioned above. The paper concludes with a brief discussion underscoring the value of an approach in terms of “inter-administrative capacity”, which tries to understand public climate action from the perspective of “ordinary” administrative players, and that ultimately reveals and condenses several factors and causes of climate inaction.

## **1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

In the first section, after reviewing the literature dealing with the role of States in energy-climate governance, we present the SNBC and the theoretical and methodological framework used to address it.

### **1.1. Administrative capacity for action: a major factor in climate governance**

The academic literature on State’s action in climate mitigation has focused on two main issues (Dubash et alii, 2022): the institutions and the modes of governance set up to define and implement national commitments. With regard to formal institutions, research has extensively documented legal and regulatory frameworks (Climate Policy, 2021; Dubash et alii, 2022). Some are specific to the climate (such as climate, low carbon acts), while others refer to legislation adopted in different sectors with a major impact on the issue. Literature has stipulated their various features, such as “mitigation action by signaling the direction of travel, setting targets, mainstreaming mitigation into sector policies, enhancing regulatory certainty, creating law-backed agencies, creating focal points for social mobilization, and attracting international finance” (Dubash et alii, 2022: 1358). Comparison have stressed their distinctive performances (Lachapelle, Paterson, 2013; Lockwood, 2021). In addition, research has studied plans and strategies (Dubash et alii, 2022) through the public policy instruments and tools they mobilize (notably carbon budgets), the perimeters they cover, and the types of sectors they address.

The literature has also dealt extensively with the different governance patterns introduced to manage national policies and their degree of heterogeneity, given highly contrasting national contexts (Environmental politics, 2021). Researchers have identified three main types of

institutional arrangement (Dubash, 2021): the creation of *ad hoc* entities dedicated to climate mitigation, the inclusion of climate issues in existing institutions and, finally, the use of entities created to deal with other issues but which can play an important role in climate matters. Here again, the respective performance of these alternatives was an issue. Work has also focused on the problems of coordination and consensus-building, which are key factors in energy-climate policies, given their cross-sectoral and cross-scale nature (Dubash et alii, 2022). They have shown the respective (dis)advantages of having a single ministry in charge (notably the Environment Ministry) or a high-level body within the state apparatus, which is often better placed to initiate change due to its stronger political support (Dubash et alii, 2022). The impact of the Ministry of Finance has also proved essential (Tyler, Hochstetler, 2021). Finally, the literature has identified the role played by national institutions in creating a societal consensus as a decisive element (Dubash et alii, 2022).

Among these works, approaches using notions such as state, bureaucratic or administrative capacity have been very useful for understanding state action in the fight against climate change (Meckling, Nahm, 2018, 2022; Tosun, Howlett, 2021; Steinnebach, Limburg, 2022; Wellstead, Briesbroek, 2022). Inspired by Michael Mann and studies on economic development, they have mainly focused on one of the major issues public authorities have to face: how to mobilize stakeholders that will have to bear high short-term costs for future collective benefits that are unevenly distributed and sometimes perceived as uncertain (Tosun, Howlett, 2021; Finnegan, 2022)? From this perspective, Meckling and Nahm (2018) have questioned the forms of division of labor and decision-making procedures between legislators (highly exposed to stakeholders) and bureaucracies (less exposed), which, in some cases, may facilitate climate policies. The same authors (2022) also used the notion of “strategic state capacity” to identify four ways to “manage” powerful interest groups: recruiting allies, aligning interests, limiting access or quieting interests. In these works, the question of bureaucratic autonomy is considered an essential condition for achieving climate objectives (Tosun, Howlett, 2021; Steinnebach, Limburg, 2022; Wellstead, Briesbroek, 2022).

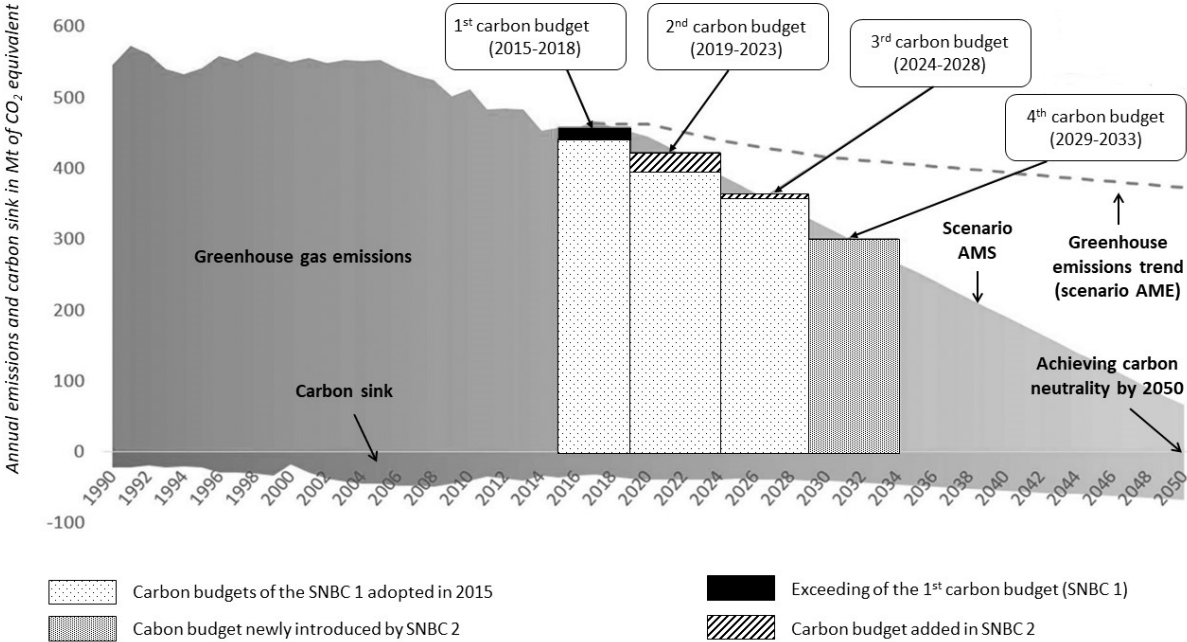
By focusing their analysis on the relations between administrations, on the one hand, and elected politicians and stakeholders, on the other, this research tends to underestimate the importance of power relations between bureaucracies themselves. Indeed, when it comes to climate change, as in other fields, state is not a monolithic actor. It is made up of administrations with multiple visions and interests, rarely aligned around a single objective. As Graham Allison points out with his notion of “bureaucratic politics” (1971), the state is subject to competition between ministries and public agencies, especially with regard to conflicts of jurisdiction. It is therefore essential to open the “black box” of bureaucracy to evaluate state capacity, on an “internal” point of view too. This article addresses this dimension, focusing on the ability of the climate administration (DLCES) to defend its cause within the political-administrative system.

## **1.2. The SNBC, a heuristic object of study for understanding administrative capacity**

To gain a better understanding of this issue, we studied the SNBC, the main tool available to the DLCES, the national climate task force in France, which depends on the Ministry of Ecology. Created in 2015 in the context of COP 21 and the Paris Agreement, the SNBC is a government roadmap that seeks to hit carbon neutrality by 2050. To achieve this goal, it proposes two scenarios (see Figure 1). The first, known as “*avec mesures existantes*” (AME, “with existing measures”), refers to the trend in the country’s gross GHG emissions, with a constant intervention framework (no additional effort required). The scenario “*avec mesures supplémentaires*” (AMS, “with additional measures”) corresponds to the GHG emissions that could be hit thanks to new, more ambitious public policies than those already in place. It thus

indicates the additional effort that the national community as a whole must do to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

**Figure 1. The SNBC: acting on greenhouse gas emissions<sup>2</sup>**



This goal –the purpose of the SNBC– is quantified through carbon budgets, defined in five-year increments, milestones to reach the trajectory outlined by the AMS scenario. A carbon budget is the sum of the contributions required from each of the GHG-emitting sectors (see Appendix 1 for a general idea of its breakdown). It allows an overall budget to be identified, whose achievement is assessed at the end of each period. If the quota is exceeded, the government can readjust the effort to be made, as shown in Figure 1 for the 2015-2018 period. While proposing a long-term trajectory (2050), each SNBC puts forward three carbon budgets for a total period of 15 years. These are regularly reviewed to take changing circumstances into account, with a revision of the SNBC every 5 years. In addition to these sectoral quotas, the document sets out public policy guidelines (“orientations de politiques publiques”), i.e. levers that the DLCES considers necessary to switch from the AME to the AMS scenario. These guidelines include instruments that ministries are encouraged to implement: regulatory (new standards in buildings or for vehicles, etc.), financial (carbon tax, fiscal incentives, subsidies, etc.) or investments (in public infrastructures, soft mobility or research and innovation). They are merely indicative or mention measures that have already been adopted or are about to be.

The SNBC raises two major issues. The first concerns the overall effort to be made in the period between the drafting of the document and 2050. The administration in charge of climate change is looking for the fastest and most significant effort possible, while the stakeholders want to postpone it (to get time to adapt, in anticipation of new technical solutions or because they refuse any evolution). The second issue concerns the contribution of the different sectors to the national effort, based on a diagnosis analyzing the impact of their activities on climate. As one

<sup>2</sup> MTES, *Rapport PPE*, 2020, page 307.

government official put it, the “cake” to be shared is unappealing to the players concerned, who prefer to leave the sacrifices to others. Thus, the players impacted by the SNBC are positioned around these two issues, whether they are administrative entities (the sectoral bureaucracies that have to manage public policies) or stakeholders (who will ultimately have to bear the cost of the measures). They are at the heart of the work entrusted to the DLCES, which must find credible and realistic strategies.

### **1.3 Analytical framework and methodology**

The hypothesis underlying our article is that bureaucracies are not “neutral” players within institutional and governance arrangements, but are endowed with a certain agency that enables them to shape climate policies. This agency depends in particular on the capacity of the administration in charge of this issue (DLCES in our case) to impose bureaucratic politics (Allison, 1971) games in its favor. By “administrative capacity”, we mean “the degree of control that state agents exercise over persons, activities, and resources within their government’s territorial jurisdiction” (McAdam et alii, 2001, 78). Such an approach requires to study the concrete and “ordinary” work of the DLCES’ agents. It needs to describe and understand their professional context, the logic behind their actions, their position in the bureaucratic field and the resources they try to mobilize (expertise, interpersonal networks, etc.) to fulfill their mission in a fragmented political-administrative space that is subject to rivalries and jurisdictional conflicts between the bureaucracies that make it up.

This article lies on an in-depth research protocol, combining two types of data.

Initially, we established a file to map players involved in the process. The idea was to identify the main ministries and departments concerned, in which type of mission and with what means and tools. This review enabled us to better understand the administrative division of labor, as well as the potential conflicts between ministerial jurisdictions. It also helped us to identify a sample of individuals we could interview to collect their insight.

Based on this file, 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 47 interlocutors from the administration and stakeholders (environmental NGOs, professional unions, industrialists, etc.). The interviews were prepared through tailor-made guides, thanks to the information gathered from many documents and enriched by interviews previously carried out. They were preceded by a presentation of the research and how the interviews would be used, before obtaining the interviewees’ consent (in particular to be recorded). The interview guides were organized in two main sections (with adaptation following each profile). A first set of questions concerned the interviewees’ role in the SNBC process, placing them in their professional context, in order to understand the ideas and interests they aimed to defend, the forms of expertise they could mobilize, the issues they identified for their structure, the results they drew from their direct or indirect implication, etc. A second set of questions concerned their place in the system of actors involved in the process, to analyze their access to decision-making centers and to better understand the forms of alliances between participants, both within and outside the state. Once the data had been collected and transcribed in full (between 6 and 30 pages for each interview, in word format, time 12, single-spaced), they were systematically cross-referenced to uncover key themes for general analysis, following an inductive approach.

## 2. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The study on the drafting of the SNBC reveals a set of highly convergent viewpoints underpinned by the following observation: the difficulty for the DLCES to draw up a roadmap recognized as legitimate within the State and among stakeholders. On the side of the DLCES, the civil servants who draft the document point to a lack of leadership and their own powerlessness to make the climate cause heard. On the side of the other (sectoral) administrations, the process is strongly negated, being considered a vague, distant exercise, unclear in its ambitions. This feeling also prevails among the stakeholders who take part in the discussions, who either express great disappointment (when they seek to defend the climate cause) or view the document's major positions with distance (when they are less sensitive to the cause). We can better understand this global picture if we relate it to the conditions in which the DLCES is expected to produce the SNBC. In concrete terms, three types of factors come into play.

### 2.1. An instrumental factor: limiting the scope of the SNBC tool

The first factor relates to the status of the SNBC. As with any public action tool (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2007), at the time of its creation, it was the object of power struggles between players sharing different ideas and interests regarding its scope. For those who championed the cause of climate change, it needed to offer a strong potential for change. For others, the issue was not to call the existing bureaucratic order into question by introducing a tool liable to weaken the historical sectoral administrations and their publics. In the end, these power struggles led to compromises that gave the SNBC weak agency, which became evident when it was mobilized by the DLCES.

#### *The SNBC, a document with little legal normative force*

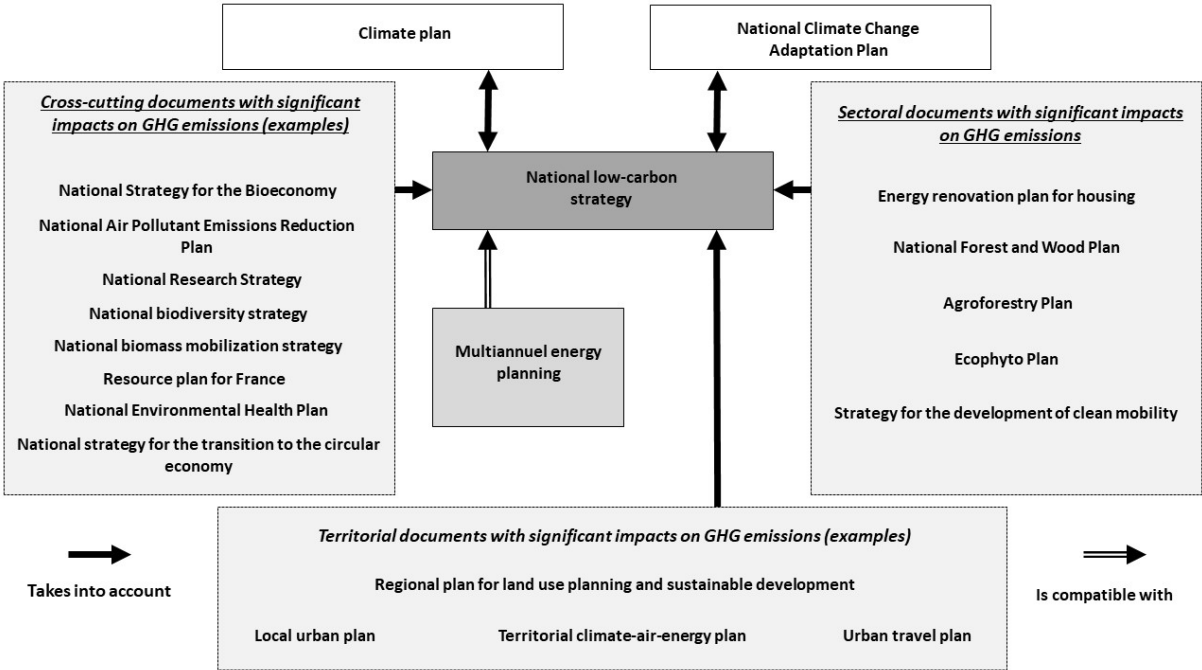
This weak agency is first and foremost of a legal nature, reflected by the SNBC's weak normative influence on other documents structuring administrative action (see Figure 2).

At first glance, however, the SNBC appears to be at the pinnacle of the planning architecture. Indeed, both national and regional documents in various fields depend on the SNBC. However, we should not overestimate its normative scope, which was fiercely negotiated at the time of its creation, especially by agriculture and fossil industry lobbies. On the one hand, its legal prescriptions aim solely at public-sector players (State, local authorities) and do not concern companies and citizens directly. This exclusion limits the SNBC's scope of action. Moreover, for the public-sector players, the use of the terms "*prise en compte*" (inclusion) and "*compatibilité*" (compatibility), which are lower in the pecking order of legal rule than "*conformité*" (compliance), means that there is room for interpretation and, consequently, a limited degree of de facto constraint. In both cases, gaps are possible between the SNBC's policy leanings and their actual implementation (Poupeau, 2023). Furthermore, while it reinforces the reference to carbon budgets in French law, the SNBC cannot turn them into real instruments for energy-climate policy. The monitoring of quotas registered in five-year tranches remains relatively non-binding. Moreover, the French Environmental Code made it clear from the outset that the sectoral breakdown of carbon budgets was merely indicative. Already protected by the fact that the SNBC primarily addresses the public authorities, private players concerned by these budgets are thus assured of not being directly implicated, since any litigation can only be addressed to the State for failure to respect its global commitments.

The example of agriculture clearly illustrates this desire to limit the scope of the SNBC. The sector represents a significant challenge for the climate, and vice versa. In France, agriculture

is the second biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind transport and almost on a par with buildings. It accounted for around 19% of total emissions in 2018, with methane (CH<sub>4</sub>, 45%) and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O, 43%) predominating, and CO<sub>2</sub> a distant third<sup>3</sup>. The first two categories, linked to livestock farming and to soil fertilization, are referred to as “non-energy”. Taking action in this sector is complex, as agriculture is in the midst of debate and crises due to the transformation of its production model, in a context of market globalization. Reducing N<sub>2</sub>O emissions may well have beneficial effects on climate policy, environment and health (soil and water pollution), but it requires major changes to farming practices, with an impact on farm yields and competitiveness. The same applies to issues relating to livestock farming, a sector that is currently encountering a number of difficulties.

**Figure 2. The “normative force” of the SNBC<sup>4</sup>**



This issue became apparent as soon as the SNBC tool was created in 2015. The Ministry of Agriculture intervened to reduce the tool’s normative scope. In Article 173 of the TECV law, the legislator stipulated that the SNBC “shall take the specific nature of the agricultural sector into account<sup>5</sup>”. These guarantees, enshrined legally, form a kind of safeguard with respect to the DLCES, obliging it to negotiate with its agricultural counterpart.

*A document with no real financial leverage*

The SNBC is also limited in financial terms. Here again, the document bears the imprint of the intentions of those who tried from the outset to preserve the existing institutional order, in other words, to entrust budgetary and economic levers to sectoral administrations.

<sup>3</sup> MTES, *Rapport SNBC*, 2020, page 3.  
<sup>4</sup> MTES, *Rapport PPE*, 2020, page 11.  
<sup>5</sup> Translated from French.



There is no dedicated funding for the SNBC, through, for example, a multi-year budget program that would give economic agents a visibility. Concerning the subsidies and incentives used to support decarbonization measures, the levers needed to achieve its targets are the responsibility of the sectoral ministries, framed by the public policies pursued on these matters. The DGITM and DGAC<sup>6</sup> manage financial support for the transport sector (e.g., incentives for the conversion of thermal vehicles), based on broader considerations than climate alone (corporate competitiveness, carmakers' strategies, increased demand for infrastructure, etc.). Similarly, in agriculture, the SNBC has no control over subsidies from the European Common Agricultural Policy, which are channeled through the Ministry of Agriculture. Finally, in the building sector (thermal renovation of buildings), another department manages subsidies, under the joint supervision of the Ministry of Housing.

The only tool on which the SNBC can rely is the price of carbon, in particular, the carbon tax. Its use, increasingly generalized in all countries (Thisted, Thisted, 2020), was introduced in France in 2014, following numerous debates and attempts (Poupeau, 2023). The carbon tax is based on a simple reasoning: to fight against climate change, the "price signal" can be a good way of encouraging economic agents (public authorities, businesses, individuals, etc.) to switch their behavior towards decarbonized or less GHG-emitting types of consumption. The tax can be applied to travel, to reduce it or to promote transport means with low CO<sub>2</sub> content (soft mobility, electric vehicles, etc.). In the building sector, it can be used to encourage homeowners to replace oil- or gas-fired boilers with other equipment powered by biomass or electricity. In industry, the target is energy-intensive and carbon-intensive processes. Here again, however, the DLCES does not really have the upper hand. The amounts, which are supposed to increase over time, are set by the Ministry of the Economy and Finance. Above all, the money it generates is allocated to the State's general budget and not earmarked for actions to combat climate change. They are therefore subject to the approval of the powerful budget department, which can decide to allocate the sums collected to reduce public deficits and debt. We will come back to this point in section 2.3.

Thus, the SNBC is a tool which has no guaranteed and permanent allocation for its policies. Instead, it acts indirectly to redirect all financial flows, both public and private, by displaying a carbon price designed to influence the behavior of economic agents. Carbon budgets fulfil this function, notably by providing investors with an indication of the asset losses they may incur in the mid and long term by continuing to finance sectors with high GHG emissions.

## **2.2. An organizational factor: a process under the control of sectoral administrations**

The sociology of organizations (Morgan, 2006) has shown that formal instruments, particularly rules, are not the be-all and end-all, since those that are ostensibly the most structuring are not always applied and can be bypassed, circumvented or neutralized during implementation. Conversely, administrative players with few favorable rules may have power, thanks to their capacity to draw on other resources (expertise, legitimacy, interpersonal networks, access to politicians, etc.). The lack of leverage mentioned above must therefore be seen in the broader context of DLCES action, and whether and how this department can capitalize on other resources. In this respect, our research highlights a key element working against it: the weak position in which it finds itself within the State when the SNBC is being drafted. Occupying a subordinate position in the bureaucracy, its civil servants have very little room for maneuver,

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<sup>6</sup> DGITM: *direction générale des infrastructures, des transports et de la mer* (general directorate for infrastructure, transport and the sea); DGAC: *direction générale de l'aviation civile* (directorate general of civil aviation).

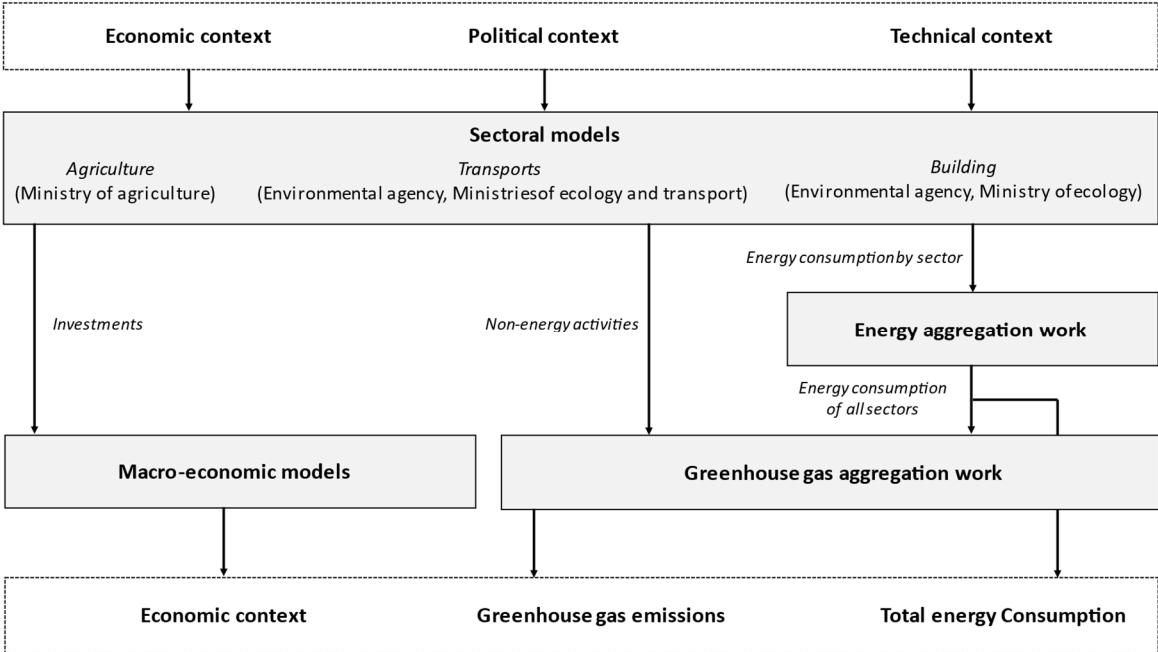
finding themselves in a position of dependence in their negotiations with the sectoral ministries responsible for managing sectors that contribute to national targets.

*The DLCES, a marginal player in the bureaucratic arena*

The SNBC is an exercise which, by construction, covers a wide range of sectors. Given this cross-cutting dimension, it would have been conceivable to entrust its production to an inter-ministerial structure, under the aegis of the Prime Minister, as occurred in some other countries. This would have given the process considerable weight and legitimacy as the administration in charge of managing the process would have been able to appeal directly to the Prime Minister to ask for arbitration.

The French governments did not adopt this option, however. From 2017 to 2020, the Ministry of Ecology is responsible of the preparation of the SNBC, as part of its jurisdiction. More specifically, the DLCES, which belongs to the Directorate General for Energy and Climate (DGEC), is in charge of it. Set up in 2008, this service is, among others things, responsible for designing and implementing the French government’s climate mitigation and adaptation policies. For this reason, it is called upon to manage the SNBC process both upstream (consultation with stakeholders) and downstream (drafting of the final document).

**Figure 3. Models used for the SNBC<sup>7</sup>**



Our interviews show that the DLCES enjoys very little recognition within the State. This is due to three main factors. The first is the status of the DLCES, which is not then a directorate and has a very subordinate position in the political-administrative system. The structure is not prestigious and attracts few career-minded civil servants –notably those from the *grands corps de l’État*. With the exception of a highly experienced office manager, the redaction work is mainly done by young civil servants, sometimes in their first position. They have limited

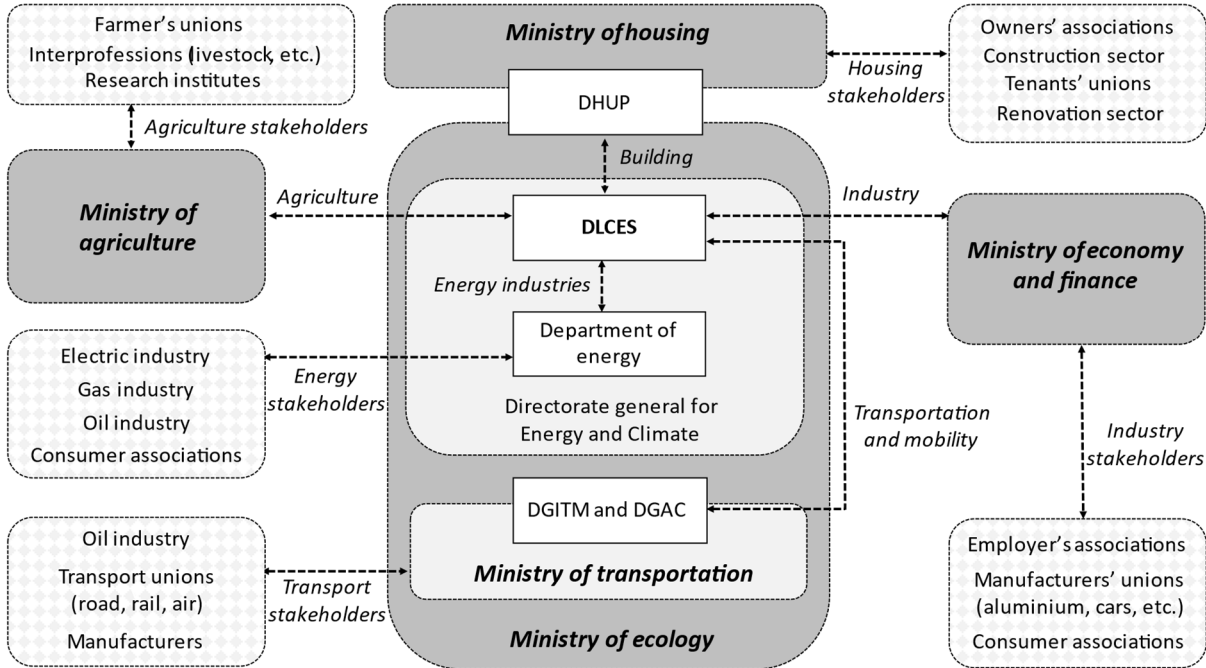
<sup>7</sup> Ministère de la transition écologique et solidaire, *Rapport PPE*, 2020, page 11.

resources and often call on trainees to support them. The second factor relates to the nature of the task performed by the DLCES. Unlike its counterparts, which are administrations with a defined field of action, dedicated resources and regular contact with stakeholders, the DLCES acts transversally, without its own intervention budget (see above) and covering a field over which it enjoys no representation monopoly. It has no regulatory powers, as this type of instrument belongs solely to the sectoral ministries. In a bureaucratic world where legitimacy and recognition depend on control of specific resources, a lot of public officers and stakeholders see it as a somewhat “soft” administration, on the fringes of State action. The third and final factor relates to the nature of DLCES expertise which is still recent and relies on models that this department does not possess in-house. Most of the them used to build the energy-climate strategy are designed and managed by other structures (see Figure 3), such as sectoral ministries (agriculture, transport), study and forecasting administrations (transport) or environmental agency (buildings, transport). Consequently, the DLCES is a player with limited expertise.

*Asymmetrical negotiation*

This weak position means that the DLCES highly depends on its ministerial contacts. This leads to asymmetry in negotiations, which can take several forms, depending on the design of the political-administrative organization (see Figure 4). Four types of situations can be identified.

**Figure 4. The political-administrative system involved in drawing up the SNBC**



The first concerns energy-producing industries, which are responsible for 10% of GHG emissions (see Appendix 1). Here, the structure in charge of managing the dossier (Department of energy) is located in the same directorate as the DLCES (DGEC), which facilitates exchanges and arbitration. The second concerns transport (31% of GHG emissions), where the DLCES has to interact with two directorates under the joint supervision of a ministry (transport) that is part of the Ministry of Ecology: the DGITM and the DGAC. The former manages road, rail and maritime transport, the latter civil aviation. For housing (19% of GHG emissions in 2018), the

third case in point, the DLCES's contact is the "*direction de l'habitat, de l'urbanisme et des paysages*" (DHUP, department of housing, urban planning and landscapes). It too is under the joint supervision of another ministry (Housing) but the latter is totally independent of the Ministry of Ecology. The fourth and final case concerns agriculture (19% of GHG emissions) and industry (18%), which are totally independent of the Ministry of Ecology and have no joint management with it.

This political-administrative design underpins several types of negotiation configurations, depending on the sectoral interests at stake. As mentioned before, discussions are about the capacity of each sector to accept a reduction in demand (e.g. eating less meat for agriculture, reducing car use for transport, etc.) or to implement decarbonization strategies (transforming production processes in industry, developing electric vehicles in transport, reducing or even eliminating oil and gas heating in buildings, etc.). They are often highly confrontational with administrations that are broadly autonomous with respect to the Ministry of Ecology, such as Agriculture or Housing. The latter refuse to accept targets imposed by another ministry that are liable to have a negative impact on "their" stakeholders in terms of changes in behavior, economic competitiveness or investment policy. Consent to act largely depends on accompanying measures that the DLCES is not always in a position to guarantee, given the few levers at its disposal. That said, organizational proximity is not always a guarantee of smooth collaboration. For example, our interviewees report bitter negotiations with the Department of energy, even though it belongs to the same directorate as the DLCES. While the DLCES would like to promote widespread electrification, the former plays a moderating role given the constraints of managing the power system and its own objectives. The same applies to the DGITM and DGAC, which belong to the same ministry as the DLCES, but which emphasize the impossibility of acting on transport demand and imposing a high rate of decarbonization.

In these negotiations, DLCES interlocutors use two types of resource to impose their views. The first is access to stakeholders. As with any administrative process, the SNBC includes a phase of consultation with stakeholders to discuss the objectives and measures proposed. This takes the form of working groups, in which other scenarios can be presented (NGOs like Negawatt or ADEME, the French agency for energy transition, etc.). But these arenas are tightly controlled by sectoral ministries, which seek to maintain a direct link with "their" stakeholders so as not to be bypassed by the DLCES. The most emblematic case is that of agriculture, where the ministry in charge of this sector manages to take over the carbon budget negotiations from the DLCES. In the buildings sector, the Ministry of Housing organizes specific working groups in parallel with those of the DLCES. Once again, these enable targets to be negotiated between players who know each other, sheltered from the more pro-climate stakeholders the DLCES invites to its own meetings. Forced to accept the demands of its ministerial interlocutors, the DLCES can mobilize few allies to obtain greater commitments. It relies in particular on environmental NGOs active in the energy-climate field, whose expertise is often useful in highlighting certain options neglected by other interlocutors. These NGOs can also provide political support. However, they remain outsiders with less political weight than the stakeholders with whom other administrations deal.

The sectoral administrations' second resource is the control of the modelling process. Using data on past and future GHG emissions, this step allows them to define the contributions of their sector (carbon budget) and to identify the measures needed to achieve them. On this point, the control capacity of sectoral administrations is twofold. On the one hand, some of them have their own models and use them as the basis for quantification work to define the efforts needed (see Figure 3). On the other hand, the DLCES is not alone in building the output data for the models, which must be fed into the carbon budgets for each sector. The sectoral administrations intervene closely in the process, through modeling groups that meet at regular intervals. The

DLCES has no interest in trying to force the issue. Firstly, it knows that the SNBC cannot replace sectoral public policies pursued by other administrations, which contest the document's overly prescriptive status. Secondly, it does not wish to get a negative vote from the steering bodies that will be called upon to give their opinion, and in which the stakeholders concerned by sectoral measures are over-represented. Even if these bodies only have an advisory role, such a reaction on their part would send a very bad signal to the State. These two resources (control of access to stakeholders and control of modeling) thus place the DLCES in a weak position in negotiations.

### *Euphemism as a strategy for obtaining agreements*

Given this reluctance, the strategy pursued by the DLCES is to euphemize the importance of the SNBC. The semantics of the text, imbued with realism and modesty, show a constant concern to minimize the strategic goals, as shown in the following extract, which presents the scenario setting the trajectory for the reduction of GHG emissions as “not prescriptive, but informative. It does not constitute a long-term action plan, but serves as a reference in particular for defining carbon budgets. It also provides elements for monitoring and managing the energy transition. This is a long-term scenario since it deals with energy and climate issues by 2050. In the short term, it describes the possible transformations in the various sectors, given the public policy measures in progress, as well as constraints on the development of low-carbon technologies and the international macro-economic context<sup>8</sup>”. In particular, the DLCES makes it clear that the SNBC is not intended to replace the sectoral policies pursued by the State, but simply to serve as a kind of reminder of a desirable course. While it is likely to reassure the other administrations, this strategy is not without a perverse effect, insofar as it further reduces the normative scope of the SNBC, already strongly constrained by the regulatory framework.

### **2.3. A political factor: between indifference and cognitive framing**

The DLCES's ability to impose itself within the bureaucracy is made all the more difficult as it does not have –and this is the third and final factor– strong political support. A first sign of this is the fact that the SNBC is not drawn up under the aegis of the Prime Minister. One finds again this relative indifference throughout the process, despite the ambitious speeches of the government.

### *Lack of political support for the DLCES*

In contrast to other strategic initiatives, the drafting of the SNBC gives rise to very little inter-ministerial arbitration. The Prime Minister's office follows the process remotely and takes little interest in a document which, like the sectoral ministries, it considers to be very distant in terms of its targets (achieving carbon neutrality by 2050) and weak in its normative scope (cf. above). Caught up in short-term problems and conflicts, its priorities clearly are elsewhere. In its mind, the stakes of climate arbitration lie more in sectoral public policies that are supposed to be linked to or stem from the SNBC, or even in certain action plans (building renovation, biomass, etc.). The organizational choice mentioned earlier reinforces this “indifference”, which makes conflicts between the DLCES and other administrations barely visible. Managed through total (agriculture) or partial (housing or transport) delegation, controversies are generally resolved upstream, depriving the DLCES of the possibility to demand arbitration at a higher level. Moreover, the DLCES has no support or interpersonal networks at Prime Minister services. Most of the advisors working for the head of government, who are the same as those of the

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<sup>8</sup> MTES, Rapport SNBC, March 2020, page 19 (translated from French, we underline).

President of the Republic<sup>9</sup>, closely focus on energy issues, while those in charge of climate are more involved in major international climate negotiations (European Union, COP namely) and are therefore relatively far removed from the concerns of the DLCES.

The fate of the carbon tax is indicative of the government's lack of support for the SNBC. As mentioned earlier, this tax is the main lever which could be used by the DLCES, subsidies and economic incentives being in the hands of sectoral ministries. The stake for the DLCES is twofold. First of all, the department needs to secure a general agreement within the French government for an upward revision of the carbon tax's trajectory, in order to send a strong, clear price signal to all economic agents (to steer their behavior towards less GHG-consuming practices). But it is also important for him (second stake) to ensure that part of this tax revenues will go to sectoral administrations (ecology, housing, transport, etc.), so that they can use it in their public policies to fight against climate change. However, on these two issues, the DLCES lacks the government support that would enable it to propose sound public policy orientations.

Shortly after Emmanuel Macron's election as President of the Republic, the new government certainly decides to accelerate the trajectory of this tax increase, to achieve the carbon neutrality target that serves as the "compass" for the SNBC. In the budget for 2018 voted by the Parliament, the carbon tax thus is supposed to raise sharply from €30.5 (2017) to €86.2 per ton of CO<sub>2</sub> (2022), with a €44,6 level in 2018, generating additional revenues between 1.5 and 2 billion euros for 2018. This decision, one can interpret as evidence of political support, in fact works against the DLCES, which hopes that the increase will provide a source of funding to support the (difficult) measures to be taken in climate. Indeed, its officials note that a high carbon tax may have a negative impact on part of the population, especially low-income households that use their thermal vehicles as a means of transport. In their view, a significant proportion of the tax revenues should thus be allocated to aid schemes, notably through subsidies for changing vehicles. Far from arbitrating in favor of the DLCES, the government decides to allocate most of the carbon tax revenue to the general budget, using it not to fight against climate change, but to reduce the public deficit. This brings us back to the issue of lack of coordination between climate and budget policies, and the importance of the Ministry of Finance as highlighted in the case of the implementation of the carbon tax in South Africa (Tyler, Hochstetler 2021).

Thus, of the 2.7 billion euros that the measure is supposed to raise in 2018, only one billion is allocated to the Ministry of Ecology to implement energy-climate measures (especially in transport, for vehicle changes). This trade-off clearly illustrates the low priority given to climate policy. Worse, it plays against the DLCES. The increase in fuel prices following the sudden tax rise contributes to considerable social discontent, known as the "*mouvement des Gilets jaunes*" ("yellow jackets movement") which begins in November 2018 in the form of sporadic actions that turn into large-scale protests. Destabilized, the newly formed government has to react. In January 2019, the Prime Minister decides to reverse its 2018 budget decision and to maintain the carbon tax at its 2018 level, i.e., €44.6 per ton of CO<sub>2</sub>. In addition, its evolutionary trajectory is frozen. This decision, which comes as the SNBC process is nearing its end, forces the Ministry of Ecology to make further adjustments. Deprived of an essential lever, unable, given schedule constraints, to renegotiate all the compromises made before, the DLCES has to find solutions to respects the 2050 carbon neutrality ambitions. It rewrites certain parts of the SNBC, mentions possible measures and corrects certain targets, while drafting its text in such a way as not to arise opposition from the ministries concerned.

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<sup>9</sup> When he came to power, Emmanuel Macron set up a system of joint advisors with the Prime Minister, to avoid any form of confusion in arbitration.

### *The cognitive framework of the SNBC: respecting some major political principles*

Its very low level of support does not mean that political choices does not influence the drafting of the SNBC. They express more in the form of a cognitive framework than in the form of regular (favorable) arbitrations. In our interviews, DLCES officials evoke the need to write a document that is compatible with three strong principles, included either formally (parameters made explicit in the sectoral or macro-economic models used) or informally (internalization of norms and political instructions). The first principle is to propose policies that are compatible with strong growth of the national economy, in order to present climate policy in a positive light for the country. Any idea of degrowth is off-limits. The second principle is to focus on supply more than demand. Thus, any overly ambitious action to control consumption and modify uses is ruled out, and references to sobriety are virtually prohibited. Finally, the SNBC has to be compatible with the policy of reducing public deficits, thereby limiting any measures that could have a strong budgetary impact. These principles have a direct effect on the nature of the document, introducing new forms of constraints with which the DLCES also has to come to terms.

### **3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The drafting of the SNBC is a good indicator of the capacity for action of the administration in charge of climate in France. Taken together, the three factors we mentioned above –all interdependent– show the state of relative powerlessness in which it finds itself in its attempt to achieve its ambitious climate targets (carbon neutrality by 2050). It relies on an instrument, the SNBC, which has limited normative and operational scope. It occupies a marginal position in the political-administrative system and has to bargain with powerful ministries, both sectoral and financial, eager to maintain their leadership, particularly in their relations with politicians and stakeholders. It finds little support among the head of government, which is focused on other issues. In the end, the picture that emerges of the drafting of this new exercise is that of a cause (climate) which is constantly being “locked in” by a coalition of ‘veto players’, both within and outside the State, who control the pace of change.

Beyond a contribution to better know the French case, this paper shows how a closer look at state “inter-bureaucratic” relations can enrich the current academic literature on climate change. To date, research on institutions and governance have made little use of the notion of “administrative capacity” (McAdam et alii, 2001). Admittedly, they include bureaucratic players involved in climate issues. But their analysis is still mainly based on a “mechanical” vision of public action, which sees governance processes as the result of an ex-ante distribution of resources, without entering the “black box” of day-to-day administrative work. The added value of the notion of “administrative capacity” is precisely to analyze in greater detail the “ordinary” activity of the State and, thus, to better understand its ability to meet the challenges of climate change (Meckling, Nahm, 2018, 2022; Tosun, Howlett, 2021; Steinnebach, Limburg, 2022; Wellstead, Briesbroek, 2022). Until now, academics using this approach have mainly focused on the crucial issue of interactions with stakeholders, that are the main targets to be mobilized, as key actors in policies to reduce GHG emissions. These authors have demonstrated how different relational configurations may (or not) influence the effectiveness of State action. Based on a complementary perspective, this article shows that this State capacity also involves its ability to organize itself internally, in order to present a (relatively) united front, a condition to propose clear, credible and legitimate orientations to all economic and social players. This “inter-bureaucratic capacity”, as we might call it, can be considered as the combination of three factors: instrumental (which tools for the climate?), organizational (which actors are the drivers of this cause within States?), and political (what place for climate in the arbitrations and major orientations of public policy in general?).

This analysis framework could serve as a basis for future comparative administrative sociology research projects, attentive to institutional design (division of administrative work, distribution of financial and legal resources, etc.), but also to the context of action of the players involved in climate issues and the resources they can mobilize in their day-to-day work (access to political arbitration, weight of interpersonal networks, alliances with influential stakeholders, etc.). Indeed, it is also in these informal relationships, not always well “captured” by major international comparisons, that public climate action can in part come into play. In addition to calling for more diverse perspectives (macro, meso and micro), this framework also has practical implications. It suggests decision-makers to think in terms of “administrative capacity”, and paving the way for reflections on staff recruitment strategies, as well as the formal and informal tools and resources they can be provided with and use to successfully meet the challenges of the fight against climate change.



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**APPENDIX**  
**BREAKDOWN OF GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS BY SECTOR IN 2018**

