

# Sustainability Transitions and Economic Viability: Comparative Insights From Norway and China

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## Abstract

Utilizing the creative destruction framework, this study examines how the economic viability of sustainability transitions evolves across different institutional contexts. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, the study compares two policy architectures: Norway's demand-driven shift to battery-electric vehicles and China's supply-focused growth in solar photovoltaic manufacturing. The results show that an institutional design in which regulatory, infrastructural, and fiscal measures interact, combined with consistent policies that earn the public's and markets' trust, makes sustainable technologies scalable. Therefore, market maturity and cost reductions are a result of these measures, rather than spontaneous competition – especially in the initial phases of transition.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Creative Destruction, Economic Viability, Norway, China

**JEL Codes:** O33, Q48, Q55

## Sürdürülebilirlik Dönüşümleri ve Ekonomik Uygulanabilirlik: Norveç ve Çin'den Karşılaştırmalı Bulgular

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Schumpeter'in yaratıcı yıkım teorisi çerçevesinde sürdürülebilirlik dönüşümlerinin ekonomik uygulanabilirliğinin kurumsal ve politik düzenlemeler tarafından nasıl şekillendirildiğini incelemektedir. İki ulusal stratejinin karşılaştırmalı vaka analizi yapılan çalışmada, Norveç'in talep odaklı elektrikli araçlara geçiş süreci ile Çin'in arz odaklı güneş enerjisi üretim stratejisi ele alınmıştır. Bulgulara göre; Norveç sürdürülebilirlik ve ekonomik uygulanabilirliği, tüketici teşvikleri ve uzun vadeli politika istikrarı ile sağlarken, Çin; endüstriyel koordinasyon, ölçek büyümesi ve maliyet düşüşleri ile gerçekleştirmiştir. Çalışma, iki ülkede uygulanan yöntemlerin farklı olmasına rağmen, teknolojik dönüşüm ve rekabetçiliğin kendiliğinden gelişmediğini, tutarlı ve uzun vadeli politika tercihleriyle şekillendiğini göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Sürdürülebilirlik, Yaratıcı Yıkım, Ekonomik Uygulanabilirlik, Norveç, Çin

**JEL Kodları:** O33, Q48, Q55

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## 1. Introduction

Although Schumpeter's creative destruction was introduced in 1942, it was hidden “under the carpet” in terms of its relevance as a key economic framework. Building on the main idea, since 1992, Aghion and Howitt have been further developing the creative destruction theory, focusing not only on technological disruption and entry-exit, but also on its structural dimensions for managing these transformations. Moreover, since 2010, Akcigit and Von Reenen have empirically demonstrated creative destruction, making the theory operational and measurable for policy. Furthermore, the theory has recently been in the spotlight, with Aghion & Howitt receiving the Nobel Prize in Economics alongside Joel Mokyr for their contributions to bringing innovation into economic models as a missing piece.

On the other hand, Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) have positioned institutions as a key factor in economics, including the creation of the necessary conditions for policy success, which naturally includes transformations as well. Nevertheless, aside from the institutional base and preconditions, for transformations to be successful, economic viability is also needed - not necessarily immediately, but rather as a structured process that will make them viable according to a plan.

In this study, we have taken two snapshots of countries (Norway and China) that have thrived in the adoption of sustainable technologies, specifically in the electric car market and in the reduction of solar photovoltaic panel prices. While the comparison will not be head-to-head in terms of the technology, the cases will represent different approaches to institutional settings that have created preconditions for these transformations.

The findings will serve as a lens for examining how institutional credibility and structural measures can facilitate transformations. Thus, while the success of policies is closely related to the conditions of the environments in which they are applied, and no place is the same, this study will show how the steps taken in these countries, aligned with the current environment, brought measurable results.

## 2. Literature Review

Sustainability transitions are viewed as integrated economic processes driven by technological innovation, institutions, and policies. Schumpeter's (1942) theory of creative destruction states that disruptive innovation is a key driver of long-term growth, in which new technologies replace outdated and less efficient ones. Building on this theory, Aghion and Howitt (1992) endogenized creative destruction by emphasizing how institutional conditions shape innovation outcomes. They argue that innovation is influenced by competitive pressures when appropriate policies and institutional frameworks are in place. Additionally, Akcigit and Van Reenen (2023) went further, providing empirical evidence that creative destruction is measurable and that its effects are shaped by policy choices and

institutional credibility. This theoretical lens can also be used to analyze technological shifts in environmental economics. Acemoglu et al. (2012) argue that innovation is not neutral and that fiscal and regulatory policies can influence the choice between clean and fossil-fuel technologies. Thus, credible policy frameworks make investing in clean innovation more appealing, as evidenced by Norway's experience, which demonstrates how these dynamics operate in real-world contexts. The spread of battery-electric vehicles was supported by fiscal incentives, charging infrastructure, and long-term policy commitment, rather than by a single policy measure (Aasness & Odeck, 2015). Additionally, predictable electricity prices and coordinated infrastructure planning have contributed to reducing ownership costs (Lanz et al., 2022).

While renewable energy targets and financing regulations have supported decarbonization, disparities in institutional capacity have led to uneven outcomes across the EU (Meckling & Nahm, 2022). Policy modifications have diminished investment certainty, although the Inflation Reduction Act seeks to establish more stable conditions in the USA (Aldy, 2023). In Asia, experiences highlight further diversity: Japan emphasizes incremental efficiency improvements, whereas South Korea adopts a more interventionist approach, combining industrial policy with public financing to advance low-carbon sectors (Kim & Kim, 2020). Notably, China's rapid expansion of solar photovoltaic manufacturing is characterized by its scale and speed. Research indicates that industrial clustering, subsidized credit, feed-in tariffs, and large-scale production contributed to reducing costs and lowering global PV module prices from 2010 to 2020 (Ye et al., 2017; Zhang & He, 2022; IRENA, 2023).

Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) and Banerjee and Duflo (2011) find that transitions are more likely to remain politically sustainable when policy outcomes are perceived as inclusive and fairly distributed. Although early adopters of electric vehicles in Norway were essentially from higher-income groups, extending tax exemptions to a broader range of consumers helped normalize adoption and mitigate distributional concerns (Aasness & Odeck, 2015). Mersky et al. (2016) demonstrate that long-term policy credibility and transparent incentive schemes significantly contributed to Norway's high electric vehicle adoption rates. Sustainability literature emphasizes that technological change is strongly connected to institutional arrangements and social acceptance within transition policies.

Generally, the current literature focuses on single-country cases, offering less systematic insight into the mechanisms by which economic viability develops. Although Norway's electric-vehicle diffusion and China's reductions in solar photovoltaic costs are well documented, few studies examine how policy sequencing, institutional credibility, and structural conditions interact during the transition process. Therefore, how various institutional and policy configurations yield comparable long-term technological competitiveness outcomes remains an interesting area to explore.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The shift to clean technologies affects production systems, market dynamics, and the distribution of economic benefits. The Schumpeterian lens can serve as a starting point for examining structural technological change. In Schumpeter's (1942) theory, creative destruction refers to the replacement of older, less efficient systems by new technologies. Aghion and Howitt (1992) integrated this idea into an endogenous growth framework, highlighting the importance of expected profitability and institutional factors in enabling new entrants to rival incumbents. Subsequent studies extend this reasoning to environmental transitions, noting that clean technologies typically replace polluting technologies once they achieve comparable economic performance. Akcigit and Aghion (2021) underline that technological progress depends not only on invention but also on institutional and policy environments that facilitate the scaling, diffusion, and adoption of new technologies.

Acemoglu et al. (2012) demonstrate that innovation responds to shifts in relative profitability, which are influenced by public policy. Strategies such as carbon pricing, research funding, tax exemptions, and targeted infrastructure projects can enhance expected returns and reduce perceived risks. When these policies are implemented consistently and credibly, firms are more inclined to invest in innovation and expand their capacity. Akcigit and Van Reenen (2023) found that environmental sustainability can be integrated into innovation-driven growth and that decarbonization depends on clean technologies combining innovative capacity with competitive costs. Early subsidies and temporary support can help with initial adoption or scaling. Nevertheless, long-term outcomes depend on achieving structural competitiveness. Institutions play an essential role in this process, coordinating public investment, reducing uncertainty, and shaping industrial environments that support learning-by-doing and diffusion.

The economics of externalities provides further insight into the need for public intervention, with Nordhaus (2015) arguing that instruments such as carbon pricing, emissions standards, and regulatory frameworks influence investment and innovation only when they are stable and credible. Sustainability transitions highlight the significance of inclusivity and political legitimacy. Acemoglu and Johnson (2023), along with Banerjee and Duflo (2011), contend that public support for environmental policies depends not only on efficiency but also on the distribution of costs and benefits. These perspectives show that sustainability transitions are shaped by the institutions, policy incentives, and social expectations over time. Creative destruction helps explain the replacement of incumbent Technologies, and technical change clarifies how policy influences innovation paths. Insights from environmental and innovation economics link these processes to long-run growth dynamics.

## 4. Methodology, Data, and Limitations

### 4.1. Methodology

This study presents a comparative case study examining how policy frameworks and institutional configurations shape the economic sustainability of clean-technology transitions in Norway and China. The analysis compares the mechanisms through which institutions, policy design, and market dynamics interact to support the profitability and transition to clean technologies. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates qualitative policy analysis with specific quantitative indicators, such as Norway's battery-electric vehicle (BEV) adoption rates and solar photovoltaic (PV) module cost trends in China.

The comparative analysis follows a “most-different systems, similar outcome” design (Ragin, 1987; Gerring, 2007). The two countries are used as analytically insightful examples rather than as typical cases, allowing for clearer identification of policy mechanisms. Norway has the highest rate of electric-vehicle adoption globally, while China is the leading manufacturer of solar photovoltaic modules and a significant contributor to reducing global costs. The strong contrast in these results makes it easier to track how policies influence outcomes over time.

### 4.2. Data

The study **contains** secondary data from the following sources:

- International Energy Agency (IEA) datasets on EV adoption/renewable energy
- International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) reports
- OECD datasets on national policy instruments and clean-energy incentives
- National policy documents from Norway (Regjeringen, OFV) and China

The analysis draws on a limited set of quantitative indicators alongside qualitative material. The quantitative evidence captures broad trends in adoption, production, and costs, while the qualitative material documents policy sequencing and institutional change. This combination allows the study to compare the underlying mechanisms shaping the two transition pathways.

### 4.3. Limitations

As a comparative case study, the analysis is designed to explore how policy and institutional mechanisms operate under different institutional contexts. Consistent with this approach, the study focuses on identifying and comparing underlying mechanisms rather than establishing econometric causality (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2014). The findings should therefore be interpreted as explanatory, highlighting how institutional and policy dynamics operate, rather than as predictive statements about future outcomes.

Norway and China are chosen because they illustrate two contrasting yet successful transition pathways, making them useful for understanding how different institutional settings can support economic viability in sustainability transitions. Both countries occupy

a central position in the literature on creative destruction (Aghion & Howitt, 1992), directed technical change (Acemoglu et al., 2012), and green industrial policy (Aghion et al., 2019). Therefore, the cases illustrate how various institutional contexts can promote economic viability, rather than serving as broad statistical evidence.

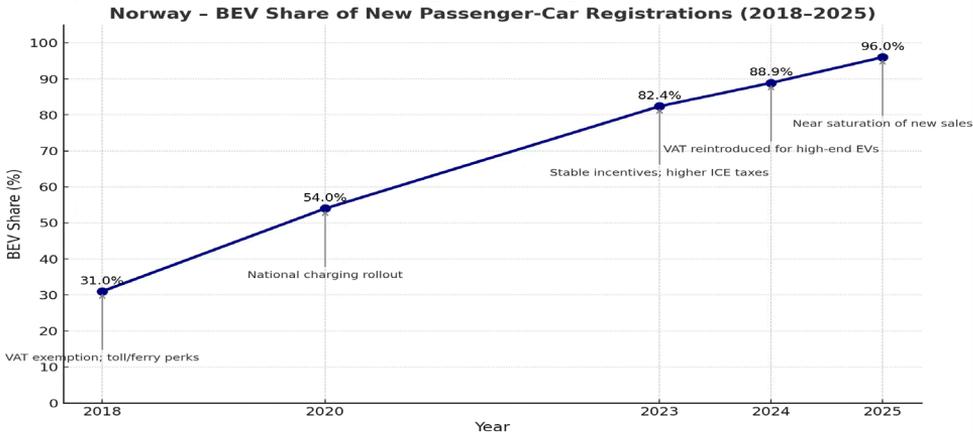
### 5. Comparative Analysis

This section compares how Norway and China achieved economically sustainable transitions through distinct policy frameworks. By examining quantitative indicators like adoption rates, cost trends, and production capacities, alongside qualitative data from national policy documents, the findings highlight the roles of policy credibility, institutional arrangements, and scale effects in shaping clean technology outcomes in both countries.

#### 5.1. Norway: Policy Stability, Cost Incentives, and Consumer Confidence

Norway is a unique example where credible and consistent policies accelerated the adoption of clean technologies. Beginning in the 1990s, the government implemented a range of fiscal and non-fiscal incentives, including VAT exemptions, reduced registration taxes, toll and ferry discounts, and free municipal parking. These policies reduced the cost of ownership of battery-electric vehicles. The incentive framework persisted through various governments, showing that electric mobility was a sustained national policy rather than a short-term effort.

**Figure 1**  
*Norway – BEV Share of New Passenger-Car Registrations and Policy Context*



Source: Opplysningsrådet for veitrafikken (OFV, 2025); policy context from OECD (2021) and Government of Norway (Regjeringen, 2024).

Figure 1 shows the rapid rise of BEV adoption in Norway from 2010 to 2024. The adoption pattern shows a slow start, followed by a sharp increase after 2017. By 2020, battery-electric vehicles accounted for more than half of new-car sales, reaching nearly

90% in 2024. This surge was driven by ongoing incentives, credible policy signals, and the gradual expansion of charging infrastructure, all of which supported sustained adoption. The turning point around 2017–2018 coincided with the widespread availability of charging networks and a stabilization of expectations regarding long-term incentives. Economic viability is largely derived from consumer uptake rather than from domestic industrial capacity, with infrastructure expansion playing a central role in this process.

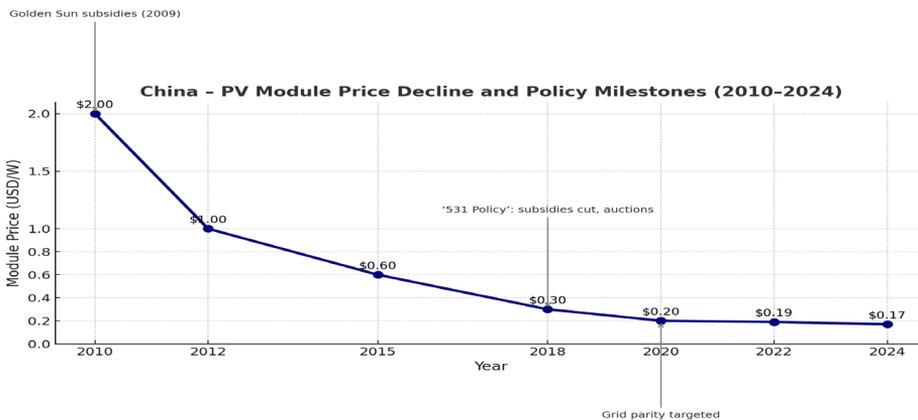
Norway maintains one of the highest charger-to-vehicle ratios in Europe, and the rollout of fast-charging networks progressed alongside the growth in BEV ownership. Kotilainen et al. (2019) suggest that higher charging density reduces range anxiety, particularly among middle-income households, thereby reinforcing the effects of fiscal incentives. Norway's policy framework also addressed distributional concerns. Early adoption of electric vehicles was concentrated among higher-income households, but subsequent policy adjustments facilitated broader uptake. Gradual and transparent changes helped sustain institutional trust and align consumer behavior with long-term environmental objectives. Economic viability did not arise from spontaneous market forces, but from predictable incentives, supportive infrastructure, and an institutional environment that reduced uncertainty for households and investors.

## 5.2. China: Industrial Coordination, Scale Effects, and Cost Transformation

China follows a fundamentally different approach, driven by industrial policies, large-scale production, and strategic state coordination rather than consumer incentives. Starting in 2009, the government used a mix of producer subsidies, guaranteed feed-in tariffs, preferential loans from state-owned banks, and provincial procurement programs to boost solar photovoltaic (PV) manufacturing capacity. These measures reduced investment risk, thereby encouraging firms to scale production rapidly.

### Figure 2

*China, Global Solar Photovoltaic Module Prices (USD per watt), 2010–2023*



Source: International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA, 2023).

Figure 2 illustrates that global solar photovoltaic module prices fell dramatically from 2010 to 2023, declining by more than 80%. The most substantial drops occurred between 2012 and 2017, fueled by fast expansion of manufacturing capacity in China and higher production scales. Usually, doubling cumulative output resulted in cost reductions of approximately 20–25%, highlighting significant learning-by-doing effects.

The decline in learning-rate costs per doubling of cumulative production consistently exceeded 20%, indicating strong economies of scale and rapid process innovation. Policy changes after 2018, including competitive renewable-energy auctions and phased subsidy reductions, did not undo these improvements. Instead, China’s firms retained cost advantages due to scale-based learning, infrastructure clustering (e.g., Jiangsu province), and accumulated technological expertise. However, the rapid expansion also generated geopolitical tensions, culminating in U.S. tariffs on Chinese solar imports, demonstrating that global industrial restructuring can produce both economic benefits and political frictions. From 2008 to 2023, the country’s PV manufacturing capacity increased by more than 20-fold. This growth illustrates a supply-driven transition where industrial coordination and increased production bolster economic viability more than consumer demand.

Overall, China’s experience demonstrates a controlled form of creative destruction, where policies intentionally aligned industrial capacity, innovation, and cost trends until clean technologies became structurally competitive.

### 5.3. Comparative Mechanisms

This section contrasts Norway’s demand-driven transition with China’s supply-driven pathway, highlighting how institutional contexts shaped sustainability outcomes. Despite significant differences in governance and policy tools, both cases demonstrate that economic viability can develop through mechanisms specific to each institution.

**Table 1**

*Comparative Structural Mechanisms of Sustainability Transitions in Norway and China*

Mechanism	Norway (Demand-Side)	China (Supply-Side)
Policy foundation	Consumer incentives; fiscal stability	Industrial planning; subsidies; coordinated scaling
Key driver	Adoption & convenience	Cost reduction & production scale
Institutional setting	High trust; transparent governance	Strong state coordination; centralized planning
Economic-viability path	Lower total cost of ownership; infrastructure normalization	Learning curves; global cost competitiveness
Empirical outcome	Highest BEV penetration globally	Lowest-cost PV manufacturing globally

Source: The comparative table was developed by the authors, drawing on the synthesized mechanisms and evidence presented in the study.

In Norway, the transition unfolded primarily through consumer adoption. Long-term fiscal incentives, such as VAT exemptions and reduced registration taxes, lowered the cost of electric vehicles and supported demand over time (Aasness & Odeck, 2015; Mersky et al., 2016). Stable policies and transparent adjustments helped sustain expectations, allowing households to factor long-term benefits into adoption decisions, as emphasized in the literature on innovation and expectations (Aghion & Howitt, 1992). High institutional trust and regulatory stability further supported the diffusion of new technologies (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2023).

China followed a different path centered on production and scale. Government measures such as producer subsidies, preferential credit, feed-in tariffs, and industrial clustering shifted incentives toward solar photovoltaic manufacturing and enabled rapid capacity expansion (Acemoglu et al., 2012; Ye et al., 2017). These conditions encouraged learning through production and contributed to gradual cost reductions, which strengthened competitiveness over time. Research on green industrial policy similarly shows that coordinated public investment and long-term planning can affect technology costs and market structures at the global level (Aghion et al., 2019; Meckling & Nahm, 2022).

The comparison indicates that economic viability does not depend on a single institutional pathway. In Norway, adoption was shaped mainly by consumer-focused incentives and stable policy commitments. In China, cost competitiveness developed through industrial coordination and large-scale production. Although the institutional settings differ, both cases illustrate how sustainability transitions unfold through policy and institutional arrangements that influence incentives, expectations, and technological development over time.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated how the economic feasibility of sustainability transitions evolves under various institutional and policy frameworks, comparing Norway and China. The two cases were chosen because they illustrate contrasting strategies for clean-technology transitions, each with significant achievements. In Norway, the shift to electric mobility was driven by broad consumer adoption. Consistent incentives, steady regulations, and an expanding charging network lowered uncertainties for households, fostering long-term adoption. Meanwhile, in China, economic success was driven by large-scale manufacturing, coordinated industrial policies, and learning effects that accelerated cost declines in solar photovoltaic technology.

Although the two pathways differ, both cases show that clean technologies do not become economically viable on their own. Instead, viability develops over time through policy frameworks that shape incentives, reduce risks, and support adaptation by firms and consumers. In this way, economic viability is less an initial condition and more a result of ongoing institutional support. The comparison also reveals that there is no single model for successful sustainability transitions; demand-focused measures were key in Norway,

whereas supply-side coordination was more crucial in China. What both experiences share is the presence of consistent, credible policy commitments that lasted long enough to help technologies surpass early dependence on subsidies.

The Norwegian example highlights the significance of predictable incentives and transparent governance in influencing consumer behavior. Conversely, the Chinese example shows how industrial coordination and scale can lead to cost reductions and increased competitiveness. For emerging economies like Türkiye, the analysis indicates that a combination of targeted demand-side measures and selective industrial support could provide a feasible transition strategy.

Future research could further expand on this field by including additional country cases or by exploring how different transition strategies affect different groups. Overall, the comparison highlights that sustainability transitions depend on institutional decisions made over time.

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