

Broadening and Deepening Support for Just Transitions under the SDGs and a Post-2030 Sustainable Development Agenda:

Recommendations for Researchers, Policymakers and the Sustainability Community

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Key Messages

- Many policymaking processes have promoted a just transition to limit job losses from stronger climate policies over the past five years.
- However, concerns over how governments allocate resources to help fossil fuel workers transition to new jobs and a recent rise in opposition to decarbonisation has weakened support for the concept.
- This paper argues that researchers, policymakers and others in the sustainability community should seek to broaden and deepen support for a just transition to counter this recent opposition.
- Broadening support will entail demonstrating how expanding the scope of a just transition beyond climate-related job losses can empower diverse stakeholders to tackle a wide range of challenges under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Deepening support will involve illustrating how procedural, distributive, recognitive and restorative justice can expand participation while building capacities to craft and assess progress with equitable responses to key environmental SDGs.
- Broadening and deepening support will strengthen links between the environmental and social dimensions of the SDGs.
- The reforms recommended in this discussion paper would also set the stage for including a just transition subheading and corresponding procedural, distributive, recognitive and restorative justice targets under a Means of Implementation (MOI) goal in the post-2030 sustainable development agenda.

1. Introduction

Growing evidence that the world is transgressing planetary boundaries has placed many policymakers in an unenviable position (Rockström et al. 2009; Raworth 2012). On the one hand, they face pressures to move away from resource-intensive development patterns. On the other, they recognise these transitions could adversely affect the livelihoods of those relying on those same development patterns. Hence, the concept of a just transition grew out of an effort to reconcile a tension between stronger environmental policies and their possibly negative impacts on affected workers and communities.

There are two interpretations of how a just transition can help ease this tension. The most common and narrowest view suggests a just transition can help fossil fuel workers move to green jobs in the face of tougher climate policies (Newell and Mulvaney 2013; McCauley and Heffron 2018). A wider, more transformative perspective suggests a just transition can empower a broader range of stakeholders to proactively address not only climate but also biodiversity, pollution control and other environmental challenges (Bennett et al. 2019; Wang and Lo 2021).

This discussion paper draws upon both of these views in an effort to serve two goals for researchers, policymakers and others in the sustainability community. The first goal is to recommend how to counter recent opposition to a just transition by broadening and deepening support for the concept under the SDGs. The second is to build off the first recommendation by demonstrating how a just transition could be incorporated in a post-2030 sustainable development agenda.

The remainder of the discussion paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews progress with and opposition to just transitions. The third section presents recommendations that can help strengthen support for just transitions in the face of this recent pushback. The fourth section recommends how just transitions be incorporated into a post-2030 sustainable development agenda.

2. Progress on—and Opposition to—Just Transitions

2.1 Progress

As noted in the introduction, the concept of a just transition emerged from well-intentioned efforts from the labour and climate justice movements to protect jobs and boost wages when environmental policies forced the closure of power plants and fossil fuel industries (Pucheta, Álvarez Alonso, and Silva Sánchez 2021). In fact, the earliest incarnations of just transition are associated with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) definition that advocates techniques such as collective bargaining, free, prior and informed consent (FPIC)

and tripartite social dialogue between governments, trade unions and employer associations to manage labour market shifts in the shift to low-carbon economies (Molina Roma 2022).

As early advocates of a just transition endorsed these techniques, the concept also gained attention from those involved in international climate negotiations. For instance, some references to a just transition can be found in a 2007 statement from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) on worker protections and in a decision at the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Framework Convention (UNFCCC) to feature a “just transition of the workforce” in relevant work programmes (UNFCCC 2015). These decisions would then set the stage for more visible shows of support following the Paris Agreement such as the COP24 Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration (Council of the European Union 2018) to the COP26 Just Transition Declaration (The Government of the United Kingdom et al. 2021).

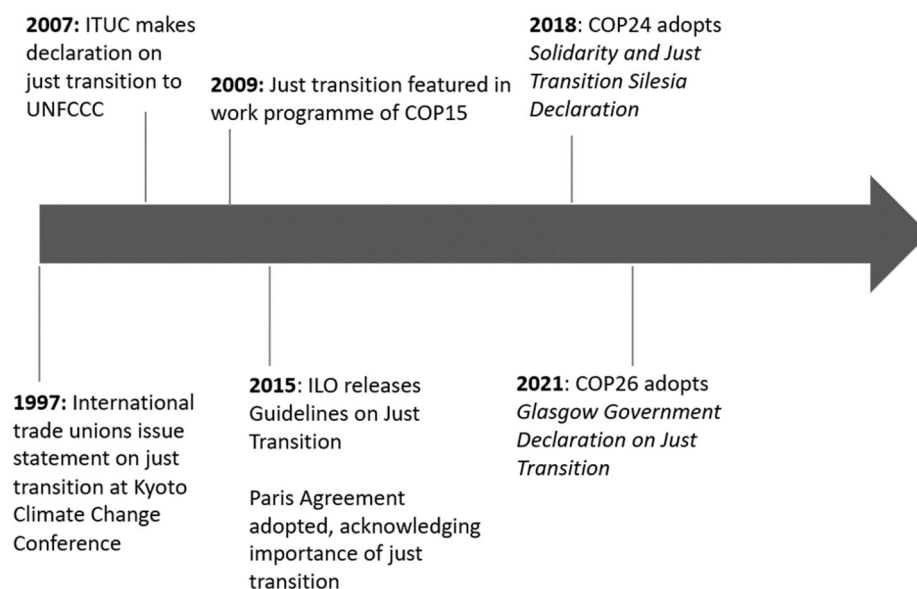


Figure 1: Just Transitions Milestones in International Climate Processes

References to just transitions would also find their way into other high-level processes. To illustrate, nearly every outcome documents from the G7 and G20 environmental minister meetings since 2021 refers to a just transition (The Government of the United Kingdom et al. 2021; Germany 2022; Indonesia 2022; India 2023; Japan 2023; Brazil 2024; Italy 2024). Further, the lone case from the G7 and G20 processes where the exact “just transition” terminology is lacking, namely the 2021 G20 declaration chaired by Italy, calls for “accelerat[ing] the transition to inclusive, sustainable and just low-carbon economies” and “commit[ing] to a just and equitable transition to sustainable economies”(Italy 2021).

Regional and national policy reforms would mirror this international level support. Notable examples include the European Commission’s creation of the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM)—part of an ambitious effort to mobilise more than EUR100 billion to help fossil-fuel



dependent regions decarbonise while retaining jobs. Another national level example is South Africa's just transition framework that offered targeted financing and other forms of support to minimise the socioeconomic impacts from transitions (Sabato and Mandelli 2024; Cock 2019). In addition, prior to the recent change in administration, the United States incorporated key elements of a just transition into its Inflation Reduction Act and Infrastructure Law. Meanwhile, countries such as New Zealand created a Just Transitions Unit to aid regions negatively affected by decarbonisation (Krawchenko and Gordon 2021).

2.2 Opposition

However, while some international processes and national policies have sought to advance a just transition over the past five years, these efforts have hit some obstacles lately. Some of these struggles can be traced to questions about the levels (Pianta and Lucchese 2020) and distribution of funding (Okoliko and de Wit 2024). For instance, concerns have been raised in South Africa about how governments, labour unions and non-state actors allocate compensatory funds under just transition initiatives (Mohlakoana et al. 2023). These concerns have been amplified by a rightward shift in politics in the Europe Union, the United States and many other parts of the world that has weakened support for decarbonisation and progressive agendas more generally.

Although funding allocations and a political pushback have presented challenges for just transition, limited support for the concept also arguably stems from a narrow focus on minimising job losses from stronger climate policies (Crespy and Munta 2023). To some extent, this focus has meant that the success of a just transition depends on convincing possible beneficiaries of the merits of reskilling and changing jobs. Making these benefits clear and convincing remains difficult, and is likely to raise questions over issues such as the aforementioned levels and allocation of compensation (MacNeil and Beauman 2022). Again, this focus has also weakened support in the wake of recent political headwinds.

Unfortunately, this narrow focus is not only evident in reviews of policies but also in the research that is intended to inform those policies. Figure 2 presents the results of a review of the 100 most-cited articles on "just transitions" over the past five years. The figure demonstrates that approximately 75 percent of the most referenced publications on just transitions concentrates on climate, energy and jobs; 20 percent covers broader conceptual issues; and only five percent is related to issues covered under other non-climate issues.

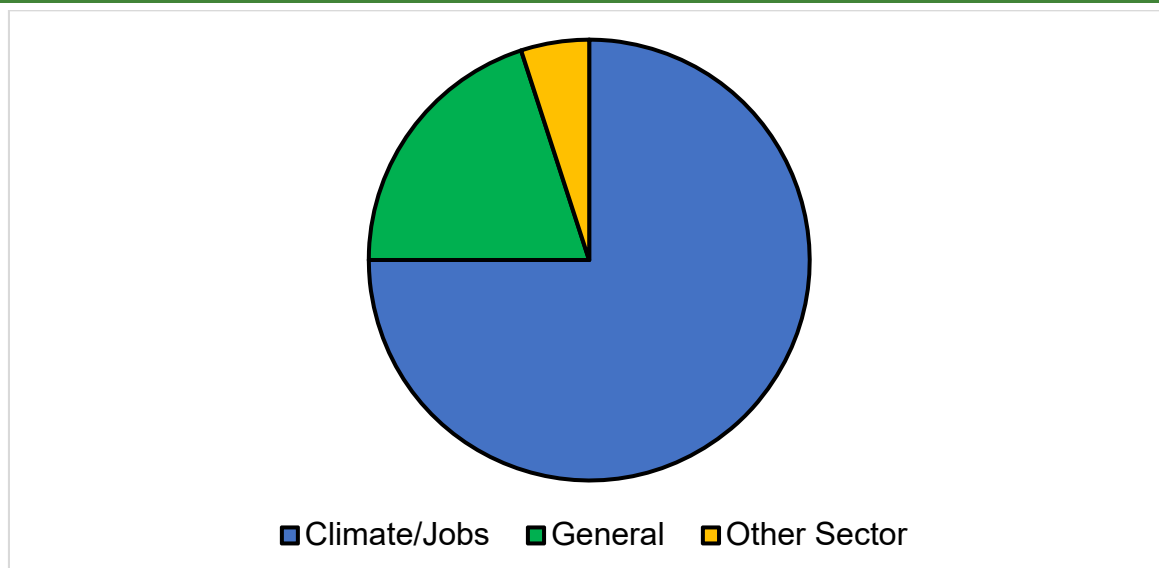


Figure 2: Percentage of Articles Focusing on Different Sectors in Heavily-Cited Just Transition Literature (2019-2024)

Note: Figure 2 was developed by conducting a search of SCOPUS of the 100 most frequently cited just transition articles. The articles were collected by using the key words “just transitions” and restricting the search to 2019 to the present day. The determination of the themes featured in the article was based on a review of article titles and abstracts; the 100 articles are not cited here.

3. Broadening and Deepening Support for Just Transitions under the SDGs

The previous section suggested that part of the reason for the challenges in advancing a just transition is the narrow focus in relevant policies and research on climate and jobs. A question that follows from this conclusion is as follows: how can existing support be expanded and deepened?

Part of the answer to this question involves ensuring just transitions are made more central to addressing a wider range of issues under the SDGs. Strengthening connections between just transitions and the SDGs would be mutually beneficial for at least three reasons. First, the processes and principles underlying the SDGs—from open working groups (OWG) to leaving no one behind (LNOB)—are consistent with the emphasis on participation and equity in a just transition (United Nations 2015). Second, the SDGs were intended to be treated as interconnected system wherein countries would strengthen interactions between different goals. A just transition can help enhance links between the environmental and social SDGs (Elder 2024; Member States of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) 2002). Finally, the SDGs consist of at least five environmental goals and more targets that include, but also go beyond, climate change. There is therefore scope to draw upon the fundamentals of a just transition to tackle a greater number of challenges found under the SDGs.

Bringing work on a just transition into efforts to achieve the SDGs could also draw on how some of the fundamentals not only broaden but deepen support for transformative changes.

In fact, there are four dimensions of environmental justice that could be applied to efforts to drive transitions and address concerns under the SDGs:

- 1) Procedural justice:** Focusing on initiating and strengthening participatory processes.
- 2) Distributive justice:** Focusing on crafting plans and policies to deliver equitable outcomes.
- 3) Recognition justice:** Focusing on acknowledging and assessing progress from different starting points when implementing a just transition.
- 4) Restorative justice:** Focusing on the need for remediation from past harms, and building capacities to ensure an even playing field (Heffron and Hazrati 2024; McCauley and Heffron 2018; Abram et al. 2022).

Illustrating how these four dimensions work in concert could help in deepening support among those engaged in efforts to deliver on the SDGs. For example, it would be useful to show that procedural and distributive justice can serve to strengthen participatory processes that bring in diverse views and enhance ownership over efforts to work on issues covered under the SDGs (Bentz, O'Brien, and Scoville-Simonds 2022; Lee, Hengesbaugh, and Amanuma 2023). Similarly, it would be instructive to demonstrate how recognition and restorative justice can lead to acknowledgements of past harms and varying starting points when assessing progress, thereby boosting the agency and sense of confidence among those addressing different concerns covered by the SDGs (Hallström, Hvenegaard, and Dipa 2019; Szetey et al. 2020).

Efforts to illustrate how procedural, distributive, recognitive and restorative justice can be applied would also benefit from concrete examples, such as Canada's efforts to engage and create a sense of agency from Indigenous Peoples when monitoring forest management, circular economy and marine use planning (Robinson et al. 2024; Kellam et al. 2019; Jones et al. 2024). Another example is Thailand where climate plans are being translated into local languages and are also incorporating local knowledge/wisdom so communities can contribute to the planning process. Finally, scope may exist to draw upon the same four dimensions to raise the profile of projects and increase the benefits from these projects while giving voice to potentially overlooked interests. This could apply to efforts to raise the profile of and expand small-scale hydropower demonstration projects that Indonesia's civil society organizations (CSOs) created used their own funds, as people-owned energy systems (Fünfgeld 2018).

4. Conclusion: Including Just Transitions in the Post-2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

The reforms recommended in this discussion paper would set the stage for including just transition in a post-2030 sustainable development agenda. (Fuso Nerini et al. 2024). At present, the most feasible option for the inclusion of just transition is a subheading under the SDG on means of implementation (MOI). Under that subheading, supportive text could

be included that is related to links between the four environmental justice dimensions and a range of environmental issues. As mentioned previously, this would help to strengthen the integration between environmental and social goals (see Box 1). It would also make aspirational social equity and LNOB principles more concrete. While the above options are likely to be the most acceptable, it may also be feasible to include references to just transition in other goals or clusters of goals.

Box 1: Strengthening Connections Between Environmental and Social Justice in the Current and Future Sustainable Development Agenda

While the SDGs were intended to be an integrated system of goals and targets, opportunities exist for stronger connections between the environmental and social goals. To illustrate those opportunities, the possible connections between the targets for the current environmental SDGs were mapped against the four dimensions of environmental justice (procedural, distributive, recognitive and restorative). As illustrated in the figure below, the results demonstrate that scope exists for making links between relevant targets and these four dimensions. In most environmental goals, only one or two targets are related to the different dimensions of environmental justice.

SDG	Targets	Distributive Justice	Procedural Justice	Recognitive Justice	Restorative Justice	SDG	Targets	Distributive Justice	Procedural Justice	Recognitive Justice	Restorative Justice
SDG 6 (Water)	6.1					SDG 13 (Climate)	13.1				
	6.2						13.2				
	6.3						13.2				
	6.4						13.a				
	6.5						13.b				
	6.6						14.1				
	6.a						14.2				
SDG 7 (Energy)	7.1					SDG 14 (Land)	14.3				
	7.2						14.4				
	7.3						14.5				
	7.a						14.6				
	7.b						14.7				
SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption/Production)	12.1						14.a				
	12.2						14.b				
	12.3						14.c				
	12.4					SDG 15 (Oceans)	15.1				
	12.5						15.2				
	12.6						15.3				
	12.7						15.4				
	12.8						15.5				
	12.a						15.6				
	12.b						15.7				
	12.c						15.8				
							15.9				
							15.a				
							15.b				
							15.c				

While this discussion paper offers potentially useful suggestions for including a just transition in current and future sustainable development agenda, it does have a number of limitations. Arguably the most significant is that the recommendations to strengthen participatory processes for formulating and implementing SDGs may be unnecessary given many countries already have political processes that enable different groups to articulate interests on environmental policies. The list of such mechanisms ranges from elections to



referendums to legislative testimony to climate assemblies. However, it should be noted that these traditional participatory approaches have often failed to ensure meaningful participation for young people, minorities and other marginalised groups (i.e. informal settlements) (Willems, Andreas, and Christiane 2012; UNICEF 2020).

A related concern is that the above recommendations place more weight on just transitions which may inadvertently be viewed as an outside imposition of Western knowledge and practices, possibly excluding more plurality of views and values. It is therefore vital that when working to broaden and deepen a just transition, various local values and practices are not ignored, but rather supported.

One final point is that a just transition complements many of the other themes featured in this discussion paper series. For instance, it can support efforts to achieve synergies between climate and other SDGs—particularly socially-oriented SDGs (such as SDG 4 (education), SDG 5 (gender) and SDG 10 (inequality)). Similarly, one could reasonably argue that applying a just transition at the international level can help limit spillovers. Finally, more explicit references to just transitions can offer a useful counterbalance to an overly technical emphasis on science-based decision-making.

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