

# A just transition: for whom?

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## Abstract

Critics often argue that sustainable development initiatives are overly fixated on climate mitigation, neglecting the broader spectrum of environmental protection and resource efficiency. Frequently, these efforts overlook the crucial social dimension. Failure to do so causes various social issues, including human displacement, increased social inequality, and impoverishment. More so than ever, the demand for clean energy production has placed socio-economic matters at odds with sound environmental practices, sometimes exacerbating social injustices. Instead of addressing the systemic inequalities built into our modern world, some policymakers still rely on an unbalanced approach to sustainable development by solely considering the environmental element. While cleaner energy production approaches would result in environmental gains, the socio-economic impact of mass retrenchments in, for example, the mining sector will have far-reaching consequences that are seemingly unaccounted for. An unfair transition to cleaner energy will put marginalised and vulnerable groups at risk of the increasing human consequences of climate change, mine closures, loss of livelihoods, and poverty. We have applied the lessons learned from within the mining industry, a sector at the center of the just transition debate, to propose potential approaches to building transformation into the very fabric of the transition to cleaner energy. Our experience in developing practical measures to assist mining communities in transitioning away from a socio-economic dependency on the mining sector can be widely applied.

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Defining “Just Transition”

The notion of a just transition was first introduced in the 1980s as part of a movement led by United States trade unions to safeguard workers affected by new environmental regulations targeting water and air pollution (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Over time, it has become increasingly evident that shifting towards a low-carbon economy will significantly impact workers in carbon-intensive industries. The concept of achieving net-zero emissions has gained traction in recent times, particularly in the context of tackling climate change. There is a growing need to ensure the transition to a net-zero emissions future includes workers, communities, and social groups. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has expanded their understanding of a just transition to encompass the creation of a fair and inclusive green economy that generates high-quality job opportunities and doesn't marginalise anyone (United Nations Development Programme, 2024).

Although low-carbon initiatives offer significant environmental and economic benefits, their adoption does not guarantee a more equitable society. The current emphasis on low-carbon solutions may perpetuate injustices and vulnerabilities by overlooking underlying structural problems in energy markets and broader socio-economic systems (Wang & Lo, 2021). Perspectives on low-carbon transitions must extend beyond technology and include a more holistic understanding of social justice. According to Wang & Lo (2021), an unfair transition is inherently unsustainable.

## 1.2 A just transition in the Global South

Northern perspectives often dominate social research, which can lead to an incomplete understanding of the unique challenges and realities faced by countries in the Global South (Connell, 2007). An unbalanced focus on northern contexts risks overlooking distinct historical trajectories, economic structures, and cultural contexts. A one-size-fits-all approach to a just transition could exacerbate existing inequalities and, hinder efforts to address climate change and promote equitable development in these regions.

The Paris Agreement, adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has recognised the importance of understanding local and regional dynamics in communities dependent on fossil fuel extraction and usage (Madzivhandila & Maserumule, 2023). However, moving towards cleaner energy generation is far more complex for countries in the Global South, where much of the labour is informal. This means they are unregistered, undocumented, unregulated, and unprotected and are often linked to vulnerable employment and unstable income. Informal workers normally do not pay official taxes, which also restricts the government's ability to provide social security support (Atteridge et al. , 2022).

Land rights in the Global South are often not formalised or clearly defined. Social norms and practices frequently preclude women or other marginalised groups from owning land. It is common for land to be regulated by a combination of traditional, customary, formal, and informal arrangements, which can result in legal ambiguity. Unclear or lack of tenure can mean some people are inadvertently locked out of support strategies, with the subsequent tenure insecurity affecting community livelihoods and land-related conflict (Atteridge et al. 2022).

Natural resources are not only a livelihood source, but for those living in the Global South, they are often a source of community identity and spirituality. When climate restricts access to natural resources, offering alternative livelihood strategies for affected communities is insufficient. It is vital to consult communities about the non-economic aspects of the transition, such as the potential psychological impacts. For example, mental health problems are common in major socio-economic transitions, most notably in mining communities, for instance, when mines close, and communities are left with few livelihood options (Atteridge et al. , 2022),

The journey to a just transition in the Global South is not straightforward and requires careful consideration of the unique challenges and opportunities present in the region. This paper, therefore, used South Africa, a country with a heavy dependence on coal, a strong union presence, a high unemployment rate and deep inequalities, as a reference point.

## 1.3 South Africa and the transition

South Africa is the biggest polluter in Africa and one of the top 15 greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters globally (USAID, 2023), which makes achieving its decarbonisation targets particularly challenging. For decades, most of the country's electricity was generated by coal-fired power plants due to the abundance of coal reserves, which have historically provided a cost-effective energy source. It is now under pressure to reduce its reliance on coal and diversify its energy mix in response to the increasing shift towards renewable energy. Despite the pressures, the coal industry continues to contribute significantly to the country's economy and energy security. As a result, policymakers face the complex challenge of balancing economic development with environmental sustainability.

As part of the just transition journey, the impact of job losses could be devastating in the Global South, especially in nations grappling with significant unemployment and poverty rates. While unions acknowledge the inevitability of job losses, they harbour scepticism regarding the fairness of this transition for workers (Konstant et al., 2021). A key role player in the South African context, is the

Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). COSATU, initiated the just transition conversation as early as 2011, and the concept was subsequently included in key policy documents like the National Development Plan.

Unions have engaged in broader alliances with civil society groups to advocate for environmental equity and ensure that the shift towards clean energy doesn't unfairly impact workers and communities. One instance of this is the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which has advocated for a renewable energy sector owned by society rather than driven solely by private gain. Additionally, unions have employed legal avenues and platforms for social dialogue, such as the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), to shape the nation's plans for a fair transition, as seen in the framework agreement regarding the transition of the state-owned utility Eskom (Connolly, 2022). Their engagement has been crucial in ensuring the transition is equitable and does not exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities. Understandably, doubts linger regarding the realisation of the promised "new green jobs," questioning whether these positions will match the quality, stability, and quantity of displaced people (Konstant et al., 2021).

In addressing the challenges that the Global South faced, a vast amount of literature exists around suggested principles to address some of these challenges (see Konstant et al., 2021; Gunningham & Sinclair, 2017; Abey Siriwardhana et al., 2021; UNDP, 2020; ILO, 2015). Consequently, the authors have identified the five most significant principles and action steps toward achieving a just transition. However, it's essential to recognise that each socio-economic context varies, requiring careful consideration and adaptation of principles and actions to effectively address each situation's unique challenges.

A South African area that represents challenges for the just transition movement is the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. The area serves as a major coal mining and energy production hub. Also, the Mpumalanga Province holds substantial economic importance, contributing significantly to national energy security and regional livelihoods. However, workers reliant on coal mines and coal-fired power stations may be disproportionately affected when trying to balance the economic benefits of coal with the imperative of transitioning to cleaner energy sources (Nel et al., 2023). For that reason, the paper's authors have identified key principles and actions, using theoretical insight, that speak directly to a coal-dependent region with a strong coal mining workforce.

## **2.0 Principles for a societal just transition**

Climate-aligned development has the potential to generate positive outcomes. However, unless conscious interventions are in place to ensure positive outcomes for the wider society, such benefits may not always be equitable. The socio-economic transformations must be fair, inclusive, and perceived, as failure to achieve social acceptance may lead to the reversal of already made gains.

### **2.1 Principle 1: Visioning and effective communication**

A well-defined long-term plan with interim milestones and achievable goals is key to building resilience in both socio-economic and environmental aspects. Implementing monitoring systems and practical frameworks is crucial for guaranteeing the success of any transformative initiatives. By incorporating international business and human rights standards into policies and operations, we can effectively minimise negative impacts on human rights during transitions while prioritising environmental protection and societal welfare. Additionally, employing communication strategies that are tailored to regional needs is essential for fostering trust and encouraging stakeholder participation.

Practical actions:

- Develop a comprehensive long-term vision and set interim milestones and targets to track progress and maintain momentum towards the long-term vision.
- Foster inclusive dialogue among various stakeholders to identify concerns, opportunities, and pathways for a just transition (Gunningham & Sinclair, 2017).
- Promote transparency and establish mechanisms for accountability, such as regular reporting, to build credibility and trust among stakeholders (Business for Social Responsibility, 2023).

## **2.2 Principle 2: Inclusive planning**

Creating inclusive plans can guide transformative actions, help acknowledge diverse rights and needs, consider long-term societal impacts, and strengthen partnerships with government and strategic allies. Historically disadvantaged communities, minorities, women, the elderly, people with disabilities, and youth require special attention, including capacity-building efforts for effective engagement. To ensure a fair transition, high-quality, independent socio-economic analyses can inform planning, social dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and social impact mitigation.

Practical actions:

- Conduct skills audits to align workforce capabilities with the demands of a net-zero world, facilitating smoother transitions. Reviewing policies on skill development can ensure alignment with environmental needs and promote sustainability.
- Invest in education, training, and skill-building programs to prepare workers for new job opportunities in sustainable sectors (Konstant et al., 2021).
- Align just transition policies and broader development objectives, including social protection measures to safeguard vulnerable populations. Integrate policies to address economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Business for Social Responsibility, 2023).

## **2.3 Principle 3: Collaborating with social partners**

Harness the role of social partners, including workers and their organisations, in facilitating social dialogue and collective bargaining. Key considerations include ensuring decent work, forecasting skill needs, addressing employment challenges, and improving working conditions. Adherence to the ILO Guidelines for a just transition fosters favourable conditions for businesses, workers, investors, and consumers in transitioning towards environmentally sustainable and inclusive economies.

Practical actions:

- Establish regular forums for social dialogue, bringing together workers, employers, and government representatives to discuss sustainable development priorities and challenges.
- Forecast skill needs and invest in training and reskilling programs to equip workers with the necessary competencies to transition to green and inclusive economies.
- Support employees' financial stability by providing advance notice of changes, offering personal finance training, and creating opportunities for reinvestment and passive income. These measures collectively foster equitable and sustainable transitions for all stakeholders involved.

## **2.4 Principle 4: Addressing inequalities**

Inequalities in quality of life, environmental conditions, and access to opportunities should be acknowledged, as well as injustices stemming from climate change and its drivers. To address these

disparities, vulnerability assessments are recommended to tailor approaches and ensure inclusivity. Recognising the diversity of working conditions among those affected and extending the concept of 'tripartite dialogue' to include representation for all workers, irrespective of union membership. However, integrating marginalised groups into formal dialogues, especially in the Global South, where certain activities may be deemed illegal, presents challenges that necessitate relationship-building and trust development through informal dialogues.

Practical actions:

- Vulnerability assessments should be participatory and tailored to marginalised groups' specific needs and contexts to design effective adaptation and mitigation strategies (Konstant et al., 2021).
- Promote inclusive dialogue and representation that facilitate meaningful participation from marginalised groups, by identifying and actively engaging with marginalised groups such as women, youth, indigenous communities and low-income populations (Konstant et al., 2021).
- Facilitate relationship-building and trust development through informal dialogues and community engagement initiatives (Konstant et al., 2021).

## **2.5 Principle 5: Targeted social investment**

Leverage and fairly reallocate financial resources to foster social-environmental resilience. Companies should promote and establish adequate social protection systems, which can take the form of Community Investment Policies and Plans. The ILO recommends integrating social protection into responses to environmental impacts and the transition challenges for those likely to be negatively affected, particularly workers largely dependent on natural resources or confronted with major structural changes (ILO, 2015).

Community Investment Plans should promote innovative social protection mechanisms that offset the challenges of the transition to livelihoods, incomes, and jobs. Before investing, companies should understand community assets to move away from a paternalistic culture of donating white elephant infrastructure or projects.

Practical actions:

- Use an appreciative inquiry approach to social development that views communities as partners in development with existing initiatives and projects already working. This approach stands directly opposite to the needs-based approach, where communities are viewed as the recipients of projects based on what they do not have.
- To offset challenges, design and implement innovative social protection mechanisms, such as income support, skills training, and access to healthcare and other essential services.
- Interact with the local community to assess their current assets, resources, and abilities, identifying strengths, skills, and social capital that can aid in facilitating the transition.

## **3.0 Moving from a just transition to a just transformation**

A just transition to a cleaner economy should consider the impact on jobs and aim to create decent work opportunities that contribute to resilient communities (Robins et al., 2018). Without carefully considering the unique social, cultural, and political contexts of the Global South, any attempt at a just transition risks perpetuating existing inequalities and marginalising vulnerable communities.

No single actor can bring about a just transition; however, governments have a pivotal role in consolidating climate, macroeconomic, industrial, labour, and regional policies. Conversely, businesses

and trade unions directly influence the transition within the workplace, while civil society organisations contribute to the wider community. A successful and fair transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient future requires careful planning and adequate time.

This means managing both the positive and negative social and employment implications of climate action across the whole economy. Effectively managing rapid and often disruptive change requires proactive thinking. It requires monitoring social impacts, recognising the significance of locality, and prioritising marginalised communities (Robins et al., 2018). This requires a holistic approach that prioritises the voices and needs of local communities, empowers marginalised groups, and ensures equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of the transition. We can achieve a truly just and sustainable transformation in the Global South by centring on social justice and inclusive decision-making.

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