

Just Transformation: guiding just transitions for an inclusive, sustainable and resilient society

Taking action to avert catastrophic climate change is a moral imperative. To not do so would be an act of injustice against those citizens, communities and workers who are most impacted by climate change and industrial pollution. Without immediate and bold action, those most vulnerable will suffer, existing inequalities will increase and a greater burden will be placed on future generations, in Europe and around the world.

Environmental and social goals are together equally imperative in achieving a society resilient to social, economic and environmental crises. An equitable pathway is possible.

A sustainable, just, resilient society over the long term needs a proactive approach that is holistic, value-based and people-centred, addressing existing inequalities and power imbalances. Equally a new societal governance structure would ensure that truly just transitions contribute to a broad, just transformation of society and a climate-safe future.

The Paris Agreement in its Preamble[1] states that “the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities should be taken into account”. The ILO Guidelines on Just Transition[2] provide a clear vision and key principles underlying the concept of just transition, while also recognising that there is no “one size fits all” as just transitions must happen at local and sectoral levels, taking into account specific social and economic conditions. The direct impacts of transitions on workers must be just and fair. The transitions should themselves be drivers of sustainable development, recognised by the ILO to mean that, ‘the needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

Comprehensive just transitions, therefore, need to drive a societal just transformation which takes into account the impact of both climate change, and the actions to mitigate it, on the wellbeing of all people - focusing particularly on the needs of the most vulnerable and those of future generations. Just transitions will look at the impacts on the existing labour market - recognising the importance of social partners, social dialogue and collective bargaining - and the overall side-effects of these processes on vulnerable people and communities together. The concept of just transition is now recognised in mainstream politics. It can play a crucial role in driving the historic

[1] See: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

[2] See: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/green-jobs/publications/WCMS_432859/lang--en/index.htm

momentum for a just and green recovery, should just transitions be seen as the means to achieve a sustainable transformation of society.

However, current variation in the interpretation of the concept has sometimes led industry and policymakers to tag unsustainable quick fixes for the decarbonisation of existing unequal and unfair markets as "Just Transition". This inconsistency risks delaying the real change, achieving neither true, widespread justice, nor a resilient green transition.

A just transformation requires a solid foundation for environmental and social resilience to be built under the whole of society. This foundation will allow us to build and create opportunities not only for those who are currently employed in high-carbon jobs or who will be employed in green jobs, but the whole of society through shared opportunities for greater well-being. A just transformation would drive a shift from the current, unsustainable model of society in which deep inequalities exist within and between countries, race, gender and socioeconomic groups; to a fairer, sustainable society in which planetary boundaries are respected, people and their wellbeing are central and natural resources are protected.

A societal transformation to a climate-safe world is only possible if we recognise the irrevocable links between social and environmental goals and the need for a new governance structure: social goals cannot be achieved at the expense of environmental sustainability. Neglecting environmental goals would undermine the foundations of social wellbeing by eroding public goods and the support systems for health and prosperity. At the same time, climate policy must be mindful of its socio-economic impacts, acknowledging that environmental sustainability goals should not be achieved at the expense of social goals, nor should they be blamed as the main driver of social injustices. Today's inequalities have been caused in large part by the proliferation of unsustainable growth models, and much of the projected changes in employment and wealth distribution will also be driven by other factors.

The following key principles underpin the vision for a societal just transformation, towards an inclusive, sustainable and resilient society.

TEN PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE VISION FOR A SOCIETAL JUST TRANSFORMATION

Societal just transformation needs to:

1 - Define a long-term vision for socio-economic and environmental resilience, with binding interim milestones and targets.

Clear monitoring and implementing frameworks for the EU and international commitments, including and beyond the Paris Agreement, EU 2030 and 2050 climate targets are needed to successfully deliver the transformation. Domestic and international policies should be guided by coherence with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the International Human Rights Framework, making environmental protection within the planet's boundaries and societal wellbeing paramount to assessments of progress.

2 - Implement transformative action through detailed and comprehensive roadmaps developed inclusively with and for all stakeholders.

Just transition plans should be holistic and inclusive and should bring all stakeholders to the table, as parts of the societal transformation strategy. They should put equal importance on the recognition of diverse rights and needs, considering long-term and society-wide impacts in the transformative agenda. Governments should be prepared to facilitate the access to - and engagement with - the processes of strategy development by less well-resourced groups. This may include but is not limited to capacity building of groups with limited resources and means to engage, for whom policies will have important impacts on their needs, opportunities and wellbeing. The development of strategies should respect the highest standards of partnership and transparency. Before developing strategies, high quality, independent and objective analysis of the socio-economic opportunities and challenges of the climate transition must be conducted for all sectors and all societal groups.

3 - Recognise social partners as key actors for social dialogue and collective bargaining in industries and enterprises.

Employers and employers' organisations must recognise social partners - namely workers and workers' organisations, as the main institutions for all negotiations related to the world of work. Social dialogue is crucial to anticipate the changes related to transitions of industrial facilities that will drive the transformation for social-environmental resilient societies. Workers, trade unions, and educational institutions have a key role in ensuring decent work, forecasting skills and adequate training needs, employment challenges, early retirement schemes and working conditions. Employers must adopt the guiding principles of the International Labor Organization's Guidelines for a Just Transition, and live up to them as they plan their transition. Governments must support the creation of decent jobs, which may mean reforming labour laws to increase unionisation in green, new sectors supporting a Paris Agreement-aligned transition to climate neutrality.

4 - Build resilience through sustainable economic diversification, aligning social goals with climate objectives and environmental protection.

Diversified economies are better able to avoid, and are more resilient to shocks. The ability to absorb and recover from shocks is also enhanced when natural resources and ecosystems are healthy. Transition investments should therefore support sustainable economic diversification into activities that do not harm environmental objectives or even help to achieve them, while also delivering livelihoods for communities. Transitions must support decent jobs and skills for all, not only those in the existing sectors and business models but also members of the society who can boost social economy enterprises and organisations. This will require inclusive approaches that extend the benefits of the transition to all, including those who have more difficulty accessing the labour market (e.g as a result of discrimination or circumstances, such as low levels of education or caring duties).

5 - Integrate the gender perspective into all the policies, plans and projects for the just transition.

Achieving a successful just transition requires a truly holistic and innovative policy approach, where the gender perspective is fully integrated in all stages of the design, evaluation, implementation, monitoring of policies and projects for the just transition, including secondary and spin-off effect of an action or the lack of thereof, for example on the job market or in terms of energy poverty and access to services in the given regions. The gender dimension of the transition challenges should be recognised and be considered as a horizontal principle to be mainstreamed in the formulation and implementation of just transition plans as well as in specific projects. For instance, every investment just transitions should be subject to an ex-ante gender impact assessment and gender tracking based on a consolidated methodology.

6- Tackle inequalities in quality of life, environment and access to opportunities, and injustices caused by climate change and its drivers.

Inaction is unjust for all, but impacts fall unevenly because of structural gender, racial and socioeconomic inequalities, on those at the frontlines of the climate crisis, and including on those faced with high external costs of the fossil fuel industry. Inaction will also aggravate intergenerational injustice by withholding future generations of opportunities and a climate-safe environment. A central tenet should be to ensure socio-economic and environmental resilience by proposing sustainable, long-term gender-transformative solutions as opposed to short-term responses to the symptoms of systemic inequality and climate change. Redistribution of wealth and resources, sustainability, protection of biodiversity, gender responsiveness, racial equity and societal wellbeing should sit at the heart of policies in order to increase resilience and the provision of public goods and services for all. Governments must ensure access to justice for climate and environmental damage. The costs of the transition should be borne equitably across society, implementing the polluter pays principle and designing mechanisms to redistribute the costs of the transition and share the benefits fairly.

7- Leverage and reallocate fairly financial resources from public and private sectors to foster social-environmental resilience.

Public financial resources for local and global transformation should be increased to advance the just transitions. The EU budget and recovery funds must be seen not as the sole source of funding for a societal transformation, but rather as an enabler to ensure other public and private funding sources are optimised and coordinated to deliver a sustainable transformation in the long run. Environmental and climate taxation should be used to support just transitions and climate action, prioritising those who are less well-resourced, most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and least able to adapt in Europe and beyond. In particular, governments should shift their support towards a massive upscaling of social economy enterprises and organisations, and community-led initiatives where social goals and just environmental protection, not profit, are central.

8 - Plan locally to transform globally while rebuilding the society.

Each region and territory has different cultures, histories, values and needs. They will also face different challenges and opportunities when rebuilding after the COVID-19 crisis and adapting to and addressing climate change. The societal transformation will only succeed when all the pieces fit together, each being subtly different but delivering together forming the whole. A place-based, local approach to designing, implementing and monitoring just transition plans, which gives the utmost importance to the voices of the communities affected, is crucial if we are to deliver all the pieces of the just transformation puzzle. Nevertheless, to complement and work effectively together, delivering justice for all, these transitions together must all pull in the same direction to build the just, resilient and decarbonised societal transformation at regional, national, European and global levels.

9- Embed sustainable development goals and circularity in production and consumption.

Expansion of certain products, services and raw materials identified as a need for low-carbon just transitions must not harm people or the environment, including in other geographies. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a map to identify the standards which must be upheld for truly just production and consumption cycles and no goal should be traded off for another. Inequity footprints, as well as greenhouse gas ones, should be calculated across all supply chains of production. This should have repercussions on the consumption patterns in the circular economy framework. In Europe and other developed regions, people must be given a choice to consume goods and services (re)produced in socially and environmentally sustainable economic operations.

10- Tailor and provide direct support for just transitions in developing countries.

Developing countries should be supported to develop and implement their own just transition pathways through a tailored mechanism, funded via new finance tools in addition to existing EU budget support. Following the above principles - with particular attention to locally-led planning and gender-responsive approaches - the EU should support partner-country led initiatives and co-design of just transition pathways, encompassing adaptation to climate impacts, and the economic transition challenges in high resource and export-dependent economies.

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This vision document is published by Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe in May 2021

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