



Mapping Just Transition(s) to a Low-Carbon World



Including case studies from



Brazil



Canada



Germany



Kenya



South Africa



United States



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Introduction: Mapping Just Transition(s)

THREE YEARS after the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change, the international climate regime is at another crucial moment: It is time to move from agreement to action and to adopt the Paris “rulebook” that will detail rules and procedures to implement the agreement (which entered into force in November 2016). Negotiating this rulebook has favoured a resurfacing of historic struggles within international climate policy, including those on differentiated responsibilities between developed and developing countries, and commitments to climate finance. A number of high-emitting countries are reluctant to fully commit to reducing their emissions, given the potentially negative impact on growth and jobs. Low-emitting countries, and especially those least developed countries which face the greatest risk from climate change, on the other hand, call for accelerated progress and greater support—through finance and technology transfers—towards their own mitigation and adaptation strategies.

At the heart of these struggles lies the fear that addressing the monumental climate challenge will inevitably require us to choose between either protecting the planet or protecting workers and the economies that sustain people. The idea that environmental protection and employment protection are incompatible, while often fuelled by populist rhetoric, cuts across social, political and geographic divides. With the backing of some governments, a handful of unions and corporations—especially in the fossil fuel sector—argue that efforts to protect the environment should not take precedence over economic growth and job protection and creation. Within the climate camp, some stakeholders believe that the destruction of jobs is the unfortunate price to pay if we are to prevent catastrophic climate change.

This jobs versus environment binary inhibits any debate on a more profound transition that could transform the economic and political structures that reproduce and exacerbate inequalities and power



asymmetries. Such a radical transition requires a redefinition of economic prosperity and social well-being. At its heart will be the creation of employment that promotes labour rights and improves working conditions while also encompassing gender and racial equality, democratic participation and social justice.

Just Transition—the idea that justice and equity must form an integral part of the transition towards a low-carbon world—is increasingly being mobilized both to counter the jobs versus environment binary and to broaden the debate on low-carbon transitions. While recognizing employment as a source of human security and dignity, Just Transition debates also focus on a broader set of justice-related issues such as the kinds of jobs and societies we envision for the future. As the early proponents of Just Transition recognized, there are many jobs in sectors that destroy people and the places they live and that shed workers even while economic growth takes place. Originating in the 1970s US labour movement, Just Transition has since evolved and spread to other geographies and constituencies, from

environmental justice groups to the international trade union movement, international organizations as well as the private sector and—particularly since its inclusion in the preamble of the Paris Agreement—global, national and subnational policy circles.

Why Focus on Just Transition?

The Just Transition debate is unique in that it brings together a wide range of stakeholders and views related to the equity and justice dimensions of climate change and low-carbon development. For some, Just Transition can be at the heart of a powerful narrative of hope, tolerance and justice; a narrative that is grounded in people's actual lived experiences and aspires to guide collective action while simultaneously giving rise to tangible alternatives.

Not all stakeholders, however, share the same idea of what a Just Transition should look like, or how, for whom and by whom it should be accomplished. While a large number of stakeholders involved in the climate debate have adopted the Just Transition

concept and language, they are not always aware of its origins in social and environmental justice. Instead of leading to an alignment of people's views, the term's growing popularity over recent years has actually led to an expansion of the worldviews and drivers of change associated with it. Though most agree that equity and justice must be factored into policy discussions and decisions on low-carbon development, different stakeholders in the debate often have distinct visions of how best to achieve a Just Transition.

This makes it difficult—especially for those who are new to the debate—to clearly identify what Just Transition stands for. It also raises a series of important questions: What kind of transition do we want? In the interests of whom? And to what ends? Answering these questions implies an in-depth discussion of the meaning of justice in the age of climate change.

Why this Report?

The present report's ambition is to contribute to a more informed debate on Just Transition and its potential for fair and ambitious climate action. It is the result of a collective mapping exercise conducted by members of the Just Transition Research Collaborative. The report begins by providing a historical overview of Just Transition and highlighting the increasingly diverse landscape of stakeholders (unionists, community activists, environmentalists, feminists, indigenous activists, philanthropists and business leaders) who mobilize and promote the concept in a wide range of settings and for a wide range of reasons.

An analytical framework is then suggested to help interpret and compare different framings of Just Transition. The analysis differentiates approaches that envision Just Transition as a means to correct gaping and urgent problems from more transformative approaches grounded in social and ecological justice. The report ends with a series of country case studies that provide insights into how Just Transition is—or is not—being mobilized on the ground. More generally, the report seeks to use the Just Transition concept and debate as a way of feeding into ongoing discussions on the role and place of equity and justice in the shift towards a low-carbon world.

This report

- provides a wide audience with a balanced account of Just Transition and the social implications of the fight against climate change;
- helps situate different framings of Just Transition and the underlying worldviews and theories of change that underpin them;
- calls for a progressive interpretation of Just Transition that can foster transformative change and climate justice for all.

A Brief History of Just Transition



"Miners in the Sierras". Charles Christian Nahl and August Wenderoth. Photo by Ad Meskens. United States public domain.

UNLIKE VARIOUS other concepts that have spread throughout the global environmental or developmental field (such as “sustainable development” or “green growth”), Just Transition, at least when it emerged, was geographically and socially “grounded”. Its origins lie in frontline efforts to defend and improve workers’ and communities’ health and livelihoods while

four US states. He was quickly joined by a group of committed union activists and sympathizers from across North America.

Noteworthy collaborators included Mike Merrill and Les Leopold of the Labor Institute; Brian Kohler, a labour leader from the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada

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