

Defining 'Just Transitions' in the Africa Context

The latest climate science shows a shrinking carbon budget that requires deep and immediate decarbonization in industrialized economies, and swift action to ensure sustainable, low carbon development pathways in emerging economies.¹ At the same time, the climate crisis is embedded within a global context of historic, systemic, and growing inequality which perpetuates deep poverty, resource and labor exploitation, unemployment, unfair distribution of the burden of pollution and emissions, and ultimately heightened social and economic vulnerability to climate impacts.

Out of this contradiction, many local movements have emerged advocating that a fair economy and a low-carbon environment must coexist: if the process of transitioning to low carbon economies is not “just,” the outcomes cannot be sustainable. These movements aim to build economic and political power from the bottom up to embed the shift from extractive to sustainable economies with principles of fair participation, distribution, and compensation. In other words: to leave no one behind. The just transitions movement is highly relevant to the African agenda, but it must be defined by local visions, definitions, and principles.

Evolution of the Just Transition Movement

Just transition principles were first developed by global trade unions in the 1980s to promote development of new energy industries in a way that secured workers' rights and accounted for negative effects on communities and livelihoods. It is heavily influenced by:

- **The Labor movement**, and in particular it has incurred a strong association with the specific social and economic fallout of coal-dependent communities and workers.²
- **The Environmental Justice movement**, a response to systemic environmental racism that disproportionately exposes low-income communities and those of color to impacts of pollution and hazardous industrial practices, centering on concepts of distributive and procedural justice at the local level.
- **The Climate Justice movement**, which seeks to reframe climate change as an economic and political issue rather than a purely physical one by directly relating the causes and effects of global climate change to equality, human and collective rights, and historic responsibilities.

Based on the deep connectivity and co-evolution of these movements over time, the concept of 'Just Transition' has recently taken on a broader definition:

The set of principles, strategies, and practices required to transition workers and their surrounding communities to thriving economies that provide dignified, productive, and ecologically sustainable livelihoods, participatory and democratic governance, and ecological resilience.³

The growing interconnectedness of supply chains, global trade, and the geopolitical implications of new technology shifts impact communities beyond the direct and formal workforce differently. The movement has thus branched into three streams:

- **Just Urban Transitions:** Putting urban populations, workforces, and livelihoods at the center of transitions to resilient or low-carbon consumer goods, buildings, transportation, manufacturing, and industrial production.⁴
- **Just Rural Transitions:** Putting rural and indigenous people at the center of low-carbon food and land use transformations. This involves creating resilient livelihoods and jobs in the evolving rural economy through promotion of sustainable food production, good stewardship of land, forests, oceans, and rewards for communities that protect and restore critical ecosystems, while ensuring land rights.⁵
- **Just Energy Transitions:** Given that the global energy sector sits at the core of low carbon transitions, this movement specifically focuses on energy sectors, both upstream and downstream, to secure workers' rights, provide social protection for affected workers and communities, remove barriers for integrating fossil fuel workers into clean energy sectors, and build necessary workforce capacity to deliver clean energy goals. It is often expanded to include delivering universal, reliable, affordable energy access.⁶

These movements are integrally connected. Advocates have had much success incorporating just transition principles into global dialogue, for example:

- The **2015 Paris Agreement preamble** enshrines concepts of decent work and the Just Transition.
- The International Labor Organization (ILO) now leads the **Climate Action for Jobs Initiative** created by the UN Secretary General's 2019 climate summit.
- The European Union adopted Just Transition as a major part of its **European Green Deal** to help fossil fuel-dependent regions transition to a greener economy.
- The United States' proposed **Green New Deal** includes many just transition mechanisms and is perhaps now the most well-known attempt to link equity to national climate action.

Just Transition in the African Context

The Just Transition has particular resonance and faces specific challenges in Africa. The IPCC consistently identifies sub-Saharan Africa as one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, with Madagascar having become the first country in the world to experience a climate change-induced drought – ongoing today. Against that backdrop is Africa's slow economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, which pushed many countries into recession and debt crisis. These challenges come at a time of unprecedented unemployment rates heightened by the continent's youth explosion. Over 34% of the continent's working-age population are 15 - 24 years old with over 10 million young people pouring into the job market every year.⁷

Added to this, African economies are largely undiversified, depending predominantly on agriculture, a climate-dependent, primary-commodity, export-oriented industry limited in local value-addition. In agriculture and extractive industries, which comprise the bulk of African GDP, very few jobs are formal wage-paying positions. There are few incentives to formalize labor laws, so Africa's record on addressing wages, social security, occupational health and safety, migrant workers, human resource development, and Indigenous peoples is sparse.⁸ The informal sector currently accounts for 70% of employment and 55% of GDP in sub-Saharan Africa, with 9 of 10 informal workers being women and youth.⁹ Wage exploitation and the lack of social protection often trap these groups into poverty and exclusion. This fragile

employment situation stifles local spending, leaving economies highly susceptible to external shocks and further exacerbating the continent's economic and social vulnerability to climate change.

Healthy and diversified economies cannot be sustained on such a precarious employment foundation. Securing jobs, livelihoods, and workers' rights is central to achieving sustainable and inclusive development pathways in Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, the tight linkages between rural and urban communities between the agri-food sector and the broader non-farm economy, and between agriculture, industrialization and the energy landscape mean that urban, rural, and energy transitions are particularly interdependent. Therefore, while the concept of Just Transitions was derived outside of Africa, it could be a useful adoption into the Africa climate discourse, with the development of clear visions, definitions, and principles appropriate for the African context.

Interpreting Just Transitions for Africa: from Concepts to Practice

African activists, youth groups, trade unions, civil society, and researchers are now deeply engaged in raising much-needed awareness on just transition and identifying challenges. This vision varies by region, country, and group, producing many interpretations of what just transition looks like in practice.¹⁰

Major gaps remain in interpreting the Just Transition concept for the African context, for example:

- What does it mean programmatically and politically to develop and implement a Just Transition agenda in Africa's hydrocarbon, agriculture, or mining- dependent economies?
- How do we pursue, recognize, monitor, and measure "just" in Africa?
- How do we account for variation across cities in developing evaluative frameworks?
- How do we reconcile local priorities with donor-driven definitions of Just Transition?

It has been said while transition is inevitable, justice is not. False solutions are facilitated by lack of definition. Likewise, definitions that are too broad and all-encompassing can render the concept unactionable. The risk of poorly defined or ill-contextualized concepts driving the Africa agenda is convenient rhetoric being co-opted and turned into false solutions that ultimately do not benefit communities. For instance, market-based solutions that perpetuate the commodification of local resources in the name of carbon offsetting and job creation can cause those very communities and ecosystems to become maladapted to a changing climate. Likewise, global industries that decarbonize in the name of the green economy while remaining profitable through continued exploitation of workers in vulnerable countries can widen the inequality divide, further destabilizing these communities. Thus, clear, community-driven, consensus-built principles for just transitions for Africa need to fill the vacuum.

This global climate juncture represents an opportunity for African countries to pivot to healthy, people-centered, sustainable economies. This is a crucial time to develop local visions and bridge the conceptual-communicative gaps between non-state actors, national policymakers and subnational planners in Africa.

Endnotes

1. [IPCC AR6, 2021](#)
2. [McCauley & Heffron, 2018](#)
3. adapted from the [Climate Justice Alliance, 2020](#)
4. [Just Urban Transitions Project, 2020](#)
5. [Just Rural Transition Secretariat, 2020](#)
6. [UN HLDE Inclusive and Just Energy Transitions TWG, 2021](#).
7. [UN Africa Renewal, 2017](#)
8. [ILO, 2020](#)
9. [UNECA, 2015](#)
10. [Hughes & Hoffman, 2020](#)