

How to operationalise just transitions

Insights from dialogues

In global discourses, the ‘Just Transition concept’ is increasingly included in national and international policies and targets to adapt to climate change and transform food systems. Depending on the angle you choose, it is, however, explained differently. Does that help to promote justice in the current transitions towards sustainability? What needs to be clarified and done to make it operational? These and other questions shape the agendas of several dialogues, discussions and even research agendas.

With climate change having widespread impacts worldwide, ‘transition’ and ‘transformation’ have become buzzwords amongst policymakers and practitioners. The Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals provide targets for transitions towards (more) sustainability and transforming our food systems. Phenomena like drought, heat, wildfires, flooding and storms devastate ecosystems and people’s livelihoods and communities. The already existing social inequalities become more visible as disadvantaged individuals and groups are disproportionately affected.

Less obvious are the *adverse* social impacts of transition efforts towards more sustainable food systems and adapting to climate change. What are the trade-offs of all these (good) intentions? Can we transition towards the global targets and, at the same time, prevent adverse socio-economic and environmental impacts on disadvantaged groups? **How can we ensure that no one is left behind?** These were some of the questions raised during the 2nd World Forum on Climate Justice (June 2021) during the session led by Wageningen University & Research. That same team organised dialogues and interviews¹ held between August and December 2021.

As a concept, ‘Just Transition’ - in all the different ways it is understood - already shows up in the preamble of the Paris Agreement and several policies and plans, including those from several UN bodies, the European Union (EU) and the World Bank. It is about time to operationalise the concept and move towards action.

Perspectives and concerns

Just Transition is about awareness of the potentially undesirable and unintended effects of food system transformation and climate change adaptation. And also about trying to foresee these effects and act upon them to ensure a fair distribution not only of the benefits of transformation but also the costs and risks. It is about acknowledging that equality does not exist and there will always be power dynamics at play, and therefore, there will always be losers *and* winners. Just Transition thus entails “the purposeful inclusion of marginalised groups, with the idea that transitions affect all social groups and all actors need to be involved, but marginalised groups usually draw the short straw”(Arjen Buijs, WUR). This also means that transitions are a political process, or even a political societal struggle, in which “stakeholders negotiate their interest and try to influence the agenda for transformation” (Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters, WUR).

¹ We refer here to: 1. Sessions at the 2nd World Forum of Climate justice, Glasgow, September 2021; 2. Dialogue at WUR on Just Transition, 2 December 2021; 3. Interviews with experts at the WUR, October-December 2021.

Many experts¹ mentioned examples of adverse **social impacts on disadvantaged groups** or **exclusion of groups** from transition processes to strengthen the case for Just Transitions. However, the scope or context of Just Transitions raised was not always clear or, at least, often very different. Some

“Is radical de-growth necessary if we want to do justice to nature also?”

Laurens Klerkx (WUR), interview 2021

stressed ‘justice for nature’ and argued that sacrifices would be needed if we want to meet the ambitious targets to save the planet. Others emphasised that we need to call on resources and the potential of everyone – including disadvantaged groups – to come up with solutions, and precisely for this reason, no one should be left behind. For example, Nigel Topping at the 2nd World Forum on Climate Justice looked at it from a macro-level financing perspective by emphasising the vulnerability of small island states. Compared to large economies, it is much more difficult for them to access funds due to the conditions that create an inequitable situation. Loans do not provide for debt repayment relief in case of disasters and make things worse for small island states who already see themselves begging to cope with the expected disasters. H.R.H. Princess Esmeralda of Belgium made a plea to recognise and stop the **outsourcing of polluting industries** by large economies to emerging countries as a symptom of economical-colonialism. Not only did the examples show the diversity of how the concept is understood, but at the same time also the risk of everyone getting lost in discussions about scope!

In every discussion, there was a strong call for magnifying and **listening to the voice of disadvantaged groups** not only in transition processes but also to challenge the work of researchers in their efforts to frame and define Just Transitions.

Very practical injustices were voiced to justify the Just Transition concept, such as the effect on women working in the fossil fuel industry, whose opportunities for **re-skilling and re-employment** upon losing their jobs are significantly fewer than those of men.

It was noted that people who lack proof of citizenship, such as migrants and landless, lower castes or nomadic people, are often **not considered stakeholders** or even right holders. Ulka Kelkar’s example from India² illustrated how interpretations of ‘mental models’ or, in this case, interpretations of proposed mitigation and adaptation approaches, like “renewable energy is benign and good and should not be questioned”, can facilitate injustices in the establishment of the world’s largest solar park. Others mentioned the role of **gender norms in reinforcing inequalities in transitions**. Women are often, implicitly or explicitly, viewed as victims, beneficiaries or carers rather than change agents in development who can engage in design, planning and decision making about transitions. Examples like these show how initial inequality causes disadvantaged groups to suffer disproportionately, leading to greater subsequent inequality.

An issue raised throughout the interviews is the ‘normativity’ of the Just concept. Justness adds a normative purpose to transitions, and what is just/unjust and acceptable/unacceptable herein depends on your worldview. Trying to define Justness without critically reflecting on the worldviews and politics involved - the question of ‘who defines what is Just’ -we run the risk of perpetuating existing systemic inequalities and making Just Transition yet another enforced concept. Moreover, it is important to lay bare these different worldviews and expectations in transitions to form a basis for constructive dialogue and expose conflict. Because of this normativity in defining something as just or unjust, Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters even wonders whether Just Transition is a helpful term for our purpose: for food systems to transform to become “more inclusive, reflecting the interests of segments in society that have been deprived of such outputs or outcomes”.

² 2nd World Forum on Climate Justice, 2021

Just for whom?

The 'Just Transition' concept was initially spearheaded by the Labour Union movement to advocate for the rights of workers in, for example, the fossil fuel industry, who would lose their jobs due to the energy transition. It soon became clear that transitions can also adversely impact **surrounding communities**. But what about **disadvantaged groups in countries in the global south**? Are the devastating impacts of illegal mining in Central and Eastern Africa, for instance, linked to the rising demand for batteries in Western Europe as part of the energy transition? Are efforts of (re)greening cities ethically sound if they lead to **gentrification** (displacing lower-income families)? Experts at WUR raised questions about their role as researchers in **connecting to people in vulnerable situations** and disadvantaged groups, listening to their views to find out their values and involving them in knowledge co-creation since this rarely happens.

The question of harm done to disadvantaged groups **in the past** came up, as well as the question about the negative impacts of transitions to **future generations**. Can the number of people whose rights we are looking at in a certain transition be defined?

Just by whom?

The question of who bears the responsibility for Just Transitions popped up many times in the discussions.

Obviously, everyone referred to governance bodies, like national governments, the inter-governmental climate and food architecture, the European Union, the United Nations and

multi-stakeholder partnerships. Others stressed the role of financial institutions like the World Bank and companies worldwide to take responsibility beyond the rules set by governments. The role of Civil Society was mentioned in furthering procedural and recognitional justice by empowering the unheard voices.

It was argued that the climate crisis – perhaps like the corona pandemic - threatens democracies because it legitimises authoritarian responses by governments. Government measures can turn out to be unstable if they are not built on civil and political rights and the resources and potential in society.

Many researchers participating in the 2nd World Forum on Climate Justice or in the WUR dialogue on Just Transition questioned their role, calling for a commitment to Just Transition in the long term and **deliberately connecting with marginalised groups**. To get a sense of the conflicts that may arise due to transitions, researchers need to engage with the communities involved to collect and magnify their stories. Another view was that we need to be much more intentional about justice: "it should be the starting point of research!".

"Some researchers wonder: do we observe or engage? I say we merge the two."

Joost Guijt during Just Transition dialogue at WUR, 2 December 2021

Just? Why (still) not?

The concept of just transition seeks to address *injustices* that have become systemic in societies. This means barriers need to be addressed in many dimensions. Individuals living in vulnerable situations often lack the **opportunity and agency** to voice their needs and ideas. Marginalised groups need **collective bargaining power** to negotiate their interests. Formal organisations must be able to **listen** to marginalised groups. Rules and laws need to **recognise groups** without formal citizenship status as stakeholders in transitions. Mental models and social norms in societies need to change since **“Culture drives politics, politics does not drive culture”** (Kumi Naidoo at 2nd World Forum on Climate Justice, June 2021). Exclusion and discrimination based on gender identity, class, age, socio-economic status, location, religious or belief systems, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other socially ascribed identities are among the deep root causes of injustice that need to be addressed. The interconnected nature (**intersectionality**) of these social categorisations is often not recognised by states.

The different perceptions and framing of Justice are perhaps both an opportunity and a barrier to furthering Just Transition policies and practices. Without **pinning down ‘Justice,’** it is difficult for policymakers to be aware of the indirect and often complex social and inequality impacts as they step up their climate and food policy ambitions.

Funding from multilateral organisations for climate change adaptation and mitigation needs to be diverted to those on the ground who need it most. At the same time, **financing conditions** make it difficult for small island states – who are vulnerable as a whole - to get access. Loans often do not provide for debt repayment relief in case of disasters, which makes vulnerable states reluctant to borrow to prepare for disasters.

Many of the speakers, participants and interviewees¹ referred to the fact that we are still **working too much in silos**, stating that there is so much we can learn from various initiatives that take place in different sectors (e.g. energy, agriculture) or are initiated by scholars or (Social/Human Right) Activist movements.

The (far too) **‘macro’ indicators** used to measure progress were criticised as these do not really “reveal the drivers for injustice done to groups and their vulnerability, nor the bottom-up activities taking place” (Hanneke van den Berg, European Environmental Agency (EEA) during the 2nd World Forum on Climate justice, Glasgow, June 2021).

Just? How?

Participants and speakers put everything on the table, from tools for self-organisation at a local level to macro-level approaches. **Bridging the silos** was considered important. Why not – for example - integrate Human Rights Due Diligence by companies in transition processes with Environmental Risk Assessment? Therefore, the ‘Human Rights community’ should connect with the ‘Sustainable Development community’. People working on the Energy Transition should talk with the ‘Food Systems Transformation community’, and the researchers should talk with the activists!

Although there seems to be agreement that a solely top-down approach is not effective nor desirable in achieving justice(s) in transitions, it is also suggested that depending on the private sector,

“As the concept [of Just Transition] enters the mainstream discussion in India, it is crucial to ask whether this will be an opportunity for women or if it is doomed to follow the same structural patterns that have demonstrably suppressed their voices.”

Swati Joshi (IEA) during the 2nd World Forum on Climate justice, Glasgow, June 2021

individual behaviour, and voluntary action to achieve justice or fairness does not work either. Active inclusion of civil society and engagement of marginalised groups through processes like co-creation is needed, as well as regulations and policy. For the former, the government should push and dare more. For the latter, we need to have better insights into the instruments, regulations and incentives the government can mobilise to influence private-sector behaviour, especially when the private sector is informal.

Viewing the matter through the eyes of the **human rights framework** seems helpful. Human rights are universal and for everyone, right? Still, the framework has not yet evolved to deliver human rights for future generations, as Halina Ward and John Morrison correctly stated in an IHRB podcast³. The human rights framework in itself is 'simply' not enough. **Besides, not everything of ethical and moral importance is captured by the concept of justice. Compassion and altruism** are also needed.

And, what about impacts across countries? How do we include those knock-on effects in a Just Transition process? Setting the boundaries of the Just Transition concept is clearly a point of much debate and differences of opinion. Besides, who decides what is 'just': some participants and interviewees also argued that Human Rights are 'Western'.

Another important aspect of the "Just? How?" question is the active involvement of civil society, particularly marginalised groups. Approaches mentioned for this are mosaic governance, multi-method approaches and co-creation. These are about the engagement of different segments of society. Still, an important part of these approaches is the empowerment of groups that have generally had less agency, thereby addressing power imbalances as well. It is also about understanding the lived experiences of those affected by the transition. Instead of developing an operational Just Transition framework, focusing on how transition really plays out in practice. Do people actually use models and theories from literature? How do these apply to daily life? Maybe more importantly, how do people view and experience justness in transitions (Laurens Klerkx, WUR).

Related to this, Arjan Buijs (WUR) suggested having a look at the 'Capabilities Approach'. In other words: looking at Just Transition from a **competence perspective**. What capacities of non-state actors need to be enhanced to engage and participate meaningfully in transitions? What capacities are needed at local government levels to achieve ethically justifiable and socially just responses to climate change? What competencies need to be developed? (Anat Prag, Sniffer, during the 2nd World Forum on Climate Justice). Nobel prize laureate Amartya Sen (Nussbaum / Schlossberg) argues that "justice can only be achieved when people are capable of achieving well-being and meaning in the way *they* desire". "With large transitions, you, therefore, tend to wonder, will people actually be happier as a result?"

Most people agreed that only addressing symptoms of injustice and small scale ad-hoc involvement of marginalised groups will not do. **Just Transition requires a complex systems approach**. This includes addressing injustices to the future generation (intergenerational justice), as indicated in the EU Adaptation Strategy. (Hanneke van den Berg, Climate Justice Forum, '21). "Clearly, it needs **"push"** (policy reforms including top-down initiatives) as well as **"pull"** (changes in individual behaviour of citizens, including locally-driven initiatives)", according to Ruerd Ruben (WUR).

A practical way to do that is through **trade-off analysis**. 'Trade-off thinking' was mentioned several times as a pragmatic approach to Just Transition. Trade-offs are about who will win and who will lose, and what will change for the better or worse as the result of an intervention. An analysis of trade-offs can, as such, determine whether particular interventions are more or less just. Trade-offs can therefore offer a more realistic view of justness and thus provide an alternative to focusing on defining and achieving some 'ideal just situation'. This can facilitate discussions on the different perceptions and expectations of the just concept and the worldviews behind these.

³ IHRB, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Puga2AHi9Ec>

“If you want to include marginalised people, you need to focus on them. It is not sufficient to think about spill-overs to those people, a preferential treatment is needed”

Ruerd Ruben during Just Transition dialogue at WUR, 2 December 2021

Including trade-offs in the multi-stakeholder planning and governance of transitions helps predict the impacts of an intervention on different groups of people, the environment and other dimensions. It is important to try and **differentiate the (possible) impacts for different groups**. For example, investments in climate-smart agriculture could lead to unintended increases in women’s workloads, as experienced in CCAFS research projects.

The establishment of solar parks on marginal

lands may benefit the urban middle-class population while it may compromise access to grazing lands on which pastoralists depend for their livelihood. Obviously, the analysis needs to be followed by **dialogue and negotiation about the trade-offs** identified.

Transparent monitoring of public organisations and businesses that commit to just transition is an absolute necessity. Through due diligence and auditing, they can be held to account.

In between the lines of statements made during the dialogues and interviews, our WUR team argues that it is important to acknowledge - *and make visible* - **power differences and conflicts of interest** and not necessarily aim for agreement or consensus. **Assuming that everything is negotiable is dangerous because many groups are simply not in a position to negotiate**. Moreover, is it possible or desirable to overcome differences in worldviews and values? Perhaps, with justice being such a normative concept, we must accept that there will always be a conflict and work from there?

Just? Start or finish?

“Yes”: everyone explains Just Transition differently. “No”: that does not necessarily stop policymakers and practitioners from using it as an evolving concept!

An operational framework for Just Transition is needed so that marginalised groups and the many other stakeholders involved can position themselves in the different meanings of justice and make informed plans, policies or decisions.

Just Transition goes beyond workers’ rights in the fossil fuel industry and the surrounding communities. It can address a wide range of injustices, including gentrification due to greening efforts in cities, inequitable distribution of subsidies for energy transition, land grabbing and forms of slavery in countries where raw materials for batteries are exploited, and many more. As a way forward, marginalised groups need to be involved with a respected voice in defining Just Transition.

A difficulty remains with the scope of Just Transition. It makes sense to start where the change needs to happen. For example, justice for workers in closing factories running on fossil fuels and equitable subsidies for renewable energy. The trade-offs in other countries where raw materials are sourced or polluting industries settle are equally important. This needs to be clarified to operationalise Just Transition.

During the dialogues, the general idea was that harm done to groups of people in the past should be addressed as part of Just Transition. This also applies to future generations. If Just Transition is a

“Vulnerable communities need to feel listened to. This is a pre-condition for action. When excluded from power structures, no action can be expected.”

Nigel Topping, UN High Level Climate Action Champion. 2nd World Forum on Climate justice, Glasgow, June 2021.

framework that allows for addressing the rights of those impacted by transitions, why would groups be excluded? The question remains how a practical approach can include this.

One position is that difficult (authoritarian) choices have to be made to reach the transition targets for the sake of saving the planet, and people are going to be affected one way or another. Another position is that the voice and agency of marginalised groups – and the general population at large - is essential to address the complex issues at stake in transition decisions and processes. The role of social movements, platforms for collective action and social inclusion deserves much more attention from policymakers, researchers and practitioners.

Although the justice concept may not cover everything that is morally and ethically important, it does assist in showing which tensions and trade-offs there are in transition processes. This will help everyone involved make a collective decision about what is acceptable. So, just? Start and finish simultaneously while considering that every ending is the beginning of yet another process! An important insight is for a team aiming to develop an operational 'framework' for Just Transition!