

# Just Transition:

*How environmental justice organisations and trade unions are coming together for social and environmental transformation*



The text was collectively compiled by organisations who participated in the workshop.

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This workshop report shares key outcomes and insights from a workshop which took place in Amsterdam in October 2019, where participants from a range of organisations met to discuss the history of their collaborations around Just Transition and the lessons learned so far. The workshop was organised by the Transnational Institute and Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands). In addition to the two organisers, participating organisations included the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Environmental Rights Action-Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA-FOE Nigeria), Mondiaal Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV), CENSAT Agua Viva - Friends of the Earth Colombia, Trade Unions Confederation of the Americas (TUCA-CSA), and Friends of the Earth Latin America and the Caribbean (ATALC).

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This short discussion paper seeks to share some of the key insights and questions from a meeting of representatives of labour and environmental justice organisations from countries in Africa, Latin America, and Europe. A variety of different projects and collaborations in recent years have been working to unite these two powerful and critical movements for transformation in different contexts around the world. Participants from three continents met in Amsterdam in 2019 to discuss their shared challenges, insights, and vision for the future.

The concept of Just Transition first emerged in the United States in the 1970s. The idea emerged from negotiations between unions, community members, and environmental organisations around the closure of a nuclear power plant. This new framework led to a growing and powerful movement in the US, that has evolved and increasingly incorporated other dimensions into the discussion, both at the national level and in exchanges with other global movements. Through the 1980s and 1990s the concept was increasingly picked up around the world. It gained popularity as a powerful framework, which could express workers' demands in relation to environmental conflicts, and unite different forms of resistance against the political economic model that has been trashing the planet, concentrating wealth, and increasingly exploiting workers around the world, with impacts falling disproportionately on marginalised communities. While the discussion of just transition originated in the energy and extractive sectors, energy use lies at the basis of our food systems, public services, transportation, and production and distribution system; transforming the way we use and think about energy requires deep transformations in every sector.

Beginning in the second decade of the 21st century, and particularly in the wake of the Paris Agreement in 2015, a growing number of projects have emerged to consciously build alliances between labour movements

and other social and environmental justice movements and organisations. These alliances are using joint actions to develop a broad and deep vision of just transition.

The concept of just transition, however, has not escaped the notice of powerful economic and political actors. Some governments and transnational corporations (TNCs) are now advancing visions that pay lip service to the concept of 'just transition', while allowing them to continue to profit from initiatives that social movements around the world have branded as 'false solutions'. From cap and trade systems, to carbon capture and geoengineering, to the promotion of massive, monocultural agrofuel plantations, a number of deeply problematic 'solutions' to the climate crisis are on the table. These are often informed by a narrow vision of 'net-zero' (achieved through carbon trading) or marginally reduced emissions, with little regard for broader environmental, social, and economic problems, or for human rights. Many of these proposals will deepen inequality; dispossess marginalised people of land and resources; diminish democratic control over resources; privatise commons, public goods and services; further the exploitation of workers; and preserve the most damaging aspects of our current economic system. This is in sharp contrast to understandings of just transition driven by peoples' movements, which see environmental harms as just one critical manifestation of a broader crisis.

In response, social movements are increasingly uniting to ensure that the concept is not watered down to the point of meaninglessness, or captured by actors who would use it to prop up a dysfunctional status quo. Just transition is, therefore, not just a contested term but a space of contestation into which social movements are stepping in order to shape the common understanding of the term. A robust and radical vision of just transition sees environmental destruction, capitalist extraction, imperialist violence, inequality, exploitation, and marginalisation along the axes of race, class, and gender (among others) as simultaneous effects of one global system which must be transformed. Proponents argue that, fundamentally,

'solutions' which try to address a single dimension, such as environmental catastrophe, in isolation from the social, cultural, and economic structures which give rise to it, will inevitably remain 'false solutions'.

Developing, deepening, and applying this analysis in diverse, complex, and local situations is itself a long process of building mutual understanding and solidarity. Exploring, understanding, and resolving tensions between historically separate movements is an important part of this process. Different movements have differing priorities, commitments, and ways of working, and their visions of just transition may differ in some important ways. This means that a clear joint analysis, and a harvesting of the insights from years of collaboration, including how strategic and theoretical differences have been overcome in particular struggles, is more vital than ever.

The movements which are today beginning to consolidate proposals under the name 'just transition' have a rich history. Movements against free trade agreements and neoliberalism; the alter-globalisation movement; energy sovereignty and democracy struggles; environmental justice movements; labour movements; decolonisation and independence struggles; feminist and women's movements; movements against racism; and fights for agrarian reform, peasant rights and food sovereignty, among others, have helped to lay the groundwork for discussions today. This diversity of backgrounds, political traditions, and strategic goals means that the dialogue that is creating a radical concept of just transition is not free from tensions or contradictions. However, it is increasingly clear that a critical mass of organisations or movements see the vital importance of working through these tensions in order to form stronger and more radical alliances for systemic transformation.

With this report we share some insights from one part of this broader dialogue and hope to make a modest contribution to the ongoing discussion. We aim to share some key insights about the principles of the concept of just transition which is emerging from shared struggles, and how this radical vision must be defended and put into practice.

# Building a Just Transition: New alliances and possibilities

## Emerging processes and alliances

In October 2019, participants from a range of organisations met to discuss the history of their collaborations, and the lessons learned so far. The closed-door workshop was organised by the Transnational Institute and Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands). In addition to the two Dutch-based organisers, participating organisations included the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Environmental Rights Action-Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA-FOE Nigeria), Mondiaal Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV), CENSAT Agua Viva- Friends of the Earth Colombia, Trade Unions Confederation of the Americas (TUCA-CSA), and Friends of the Earth Latin America and the Caribbean (ATALC). Participants briefly shared their experiences with three examples of collaboration between labour and environmental justice organisations. These three collaborations in different regions show how the concept of just transition is helping to catalyse and shape collaborations, and to work out in practice a more radical and inclusive vision of social and environmental change.

### Nigerian Labour Congress & Environmental Rights Action-Friends of the Earth Nigeria

Labour Unions and CSO have recognised the need to leverage their differing expertise for a shared vision for the promotion of a Just Transition. Since the 1990s, there have been several instances of such collaborations in Nigeria. However, these have so far been intermittent, and have been led by workers' demands for recognition of their rights, and for better working conditions. Such instances included joint mobilisation of citizens and workers from the formal and informal sectors against the IMF supported Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) in the late 1980s, and protests against the national government's removal of subsidies from petroleum products, which led to a hike in petrol pump prices in the 1990s and 2000s.

Other critical issues, such as human rights violations, environmental degradation and conservation, which could have formed important national focal points for collaboration, did not result in the same kind of joint action. As a result, Labour Union activities have diverged to some extent from the goals and interests of environmental Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), sometimes causing division between the movements.

To ensure a stronger and more unified struggle for Just Transition, Labour Unions and CSOs must fashion new ways of working together to protect human rights, access to justice, and the environment. In particular, the recent collaboration between the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and ERA-FOE Nigeria on evidence-based advocacy on Just Transition provided important opportunities for Labour movements and CSOs to jointly explore what Just Transition means for citizens and workers, especially in the petroleum and agriculture sectors. Such broad perspectives are required to leverage expertise to combat climate change, protect the rights and livelihoods of workers, and ensure a Just Transition from the current mode of production and consumption toward a zero carbon economy. Through this collaboration, which started in 2017-2018, Labour Unions and CSOs are now learning to engage in an open and participatory manner to reduce division between these critical movements, to strengthen workers' rights and citizens' voices to address the challenges of Just Transition. This can help to shape the major changes in the mode of production and consumption which will be needed to maintain the earth's resilience and to preserve ecosystems in Nigeria and around the world. Such synergy between Nigeria's foremost environmental advocacy group and the formidable NLC is bound to provide opportunities to mobilise citizens for a Just Transition across sectors, as well as allowing for further learning and the development of more refined and effective strategies.

### Trade Union Confederation of the Americas & Friends of the Earth Latin America and the Caribbean

Collaborations between environmental and labour movements in Latin America and the Caribbean have a long history, and this alliance also

includes other social movements and organisations. Participants identified 1992 as an important year for consolidating alliances: this year marked both the Rio Earth Summit and 500 years of indigenous, black, and popular resistance to colonisation. This joint action has continued since then, strengthening movements' analyses, strategies and responses to different historical challenges. Among others, this helped to lay the groundwork for the successful campaign against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which was active between 1999 and 2005.

In the years of the FTAA campaign, movements mobilised together in a wide range of demonstrations, workshops, and common actions. These years of joint action helped to consolidate an alliance between trade unions, environmental justice movements, student movements, peasant movements, feminist movements, indigenous organisations and movements against debt, among others. Importantly, this was an alliance formed especially around class interests, construed in an inclusive and encompassing sense. Some of those converged under the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA).

Different cycles of progressive and reactionary politics within the region have led to different processes and responses at the national or regional level. However workshop participants identified a clear trend towards integration of regional dialogues: the regional Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) together with environmental, women's and peasant organisations (ATALC, WMW and CLOC-LVC, among others) regularly exchange information and engage in dialogue about their strategies and common work. This ongoing exchange has contributed to building trust among different movements. At the same time, it has helped to reinterpret the 'environmental question' in relation to labour, developing a vision of a social organisation of labour which is oriented towards the fundamental dignity of human and non-human life. In this conception, production would be linked to the rhythms of nature's reproduction. This analysis points to the possibility of an emancipatory and dignifying reinterpretation of labour, bringing about a new understanding of both use value and labour power. The broad unifying analysis in the region has been reflected in the defence

of people's solutions and rights against corporate power and neoliberalism, and in building democracy. This was an explicit focus at the Rio +20 Peoples' Summit which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2012.

As an example of the consolidation of regular exchanges and joint analysis between labour and environmental movements, participants offered the case of the Development Platform of the Americas. This strategic document was built up by trade unions, in conversation with other movements, in 2013 and 2014. The document ultimately included a vision of sustainable development, social, economic and environmental justice. Likewise the *Jornada Continental* for democracy and against neoliberalism, a regional space of convergence for mobilisation, common analysis and strategies to face the current wave of authoritarianism and the rise of the right-wing, helped to build stronger collective conversations and actions. In 2015 the first moment of convergence that led to this space, was the celebration of the ten year anniversary of the defeat of the FTAA. This moment also brought movements together to confront the challenges to democracy. Since 2015 the *Jornada Continental* has been providing a space for collective action on the continent and creating new moments for strategic analysis and convergence.

However, despite the vitality of these existing alliances and networks, there are major challenges in the region today. At the national level, and across the region more broadly, there are rising threats from right-wing forces including a new wave of authoritarian governments which pose serious threats to transformative and emancipatory movements. Globally, changes in the way that labour is organised pose new threats to traditional labour movements: a growing discourse around the future of work – and sometimes 'the end of work' – the emergence of so-called 'disruptive technologies' and 'platform capitalism' which have undermined established workers' rights in many jurisdictions, and the growing influence of the digital economy are all critical factors bearing on movements for a just transition.

## FNV & Milieudéfensie

The collaboration between FNV and key environmental organisations in the Netherlands began in 2013 following an agreement on energy in the Dutch Social and Economic Council. Organisations like Natuur en Milieu, Milieudéfensie and Greenpeace have their own particular goals, but clearly also share important values with labour movements. The trade union movement struggles for decent jobs, workers' health and safety and a social security system based on solidarity. Sustainability and 'just transition' have become increasingly central topics to the movement. Environmental organisations and the trade union movement 'found each other' in the slogan 'there are no jobs on a dead planet'. In the years following 2013, the collaboration between FNV and environmental organisations led a growing number of joint activities. For example, FNV participated in the advisory group for a study by CE Delft initiated by Milieudéfensie in 2016. This research analysed the distribution of the costs of climate policy.

This collaboration deepened in 2017: while the new Dutch national government was being formed, FNV and three environmental organisations jointly wrote a 'Just Transition Manifesto'. The Manifesto stressed the importance of: fair distribution of climate subsidies; citizens' participation in energy transitions in their towns; a green job plan; making 250,000 houses a year more sustainable, and making clean and healthy products and services cheaper, while polluting alternatives become more expensive.

In 2018, FNV and Milieudéfensie collaborated on a new energy agreement in the Social and Economic Council, focused on employment issues. In this report, titled: "Energy transition and employment: opportunities for a sustainable future," all the partners agreed on seven core recommendations, calling on the Dutch government to make specific strong commitments related to integrating the needs of workers, and of society more broadly, into all discussions of energy transition. The authors jointly called for the government to protect the rights of present and future workers, through

education, integrated approaches to developing green jobs, compensation for job losses, and a focus on providing decent work in emerging green industries.

This movement has also taken place at the international level. In April 2018, Mondiaal FNV participated in the Just Energy Transition conference with NGOs and community organisations from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and the Netherlands, strengthening lobbying, advocacy and campaigning capacity for a Just Energy Transition (JET). As a result of that conference, Mondiaal FNV and Milieudéfensie now support the just transition project carried out in Nigeria in collaboration between the Nigeria Labour Congress (partner of Mondiaal FNV) and Environmental Rights Action (Friends of the Earth Nigeria).

Medio 2018, a joint venture of several organisations including FNV and Milieudéfensie, has also written a memorandum as a framework for the Climate Council to discuss the distribution of the benefits and burdens of the Climate Agreement.<sup>1</sup> More than 150 civil society organisations were commissioned by the government to make agreements about how to achieve the Paris Agreement goals. The resulting process lasted more than one year. A red/green coalition was built by FNV and Milieudéfensie. It became progressively stronger, culminating in a joint ultimatum letter in October 2018, a joint press conference in December 2018 (FNV, Greenpeace and Milieudéfensie to protest against the preliminary agreements of the Dutch climate agreement) and the organisation of a huge climate march in March 2019 (the largest environmental gathering in history of the Netherlands). FNV and Milieudéfensie were the main organisers of the demonstration. According to one Dutch daily newspaper, the demonstration resulted in a radical shift in the policy of the Dutch government. Three days after the march the Dutch Prime Minister announced that households would not carry the cost of CO<sub>2</sub>-reduction measures by large polluters, and would be compensated for increased costs linked to climate policy.

In the agreements surrounding the Climate Agreement, the different organisations agreed in advance that FNV would leave the negotiations if the environmental commitments of the Agreement were insufficient, while environmental organisations would leave if the ‘coal fund,’ demanded by FNV to provide resources for workers losing their jobs because of the closure of coal-energy plants, was not guaranteed. One of the results of this combined effort by labour and environmental movement is that Climate Justice has become a broadly recognised concept in the Dutch political debate.

On critical note, the collaboration was put under pressure when organised business started a counter-campaign, responding to movements’ demands for a tax on polluters by mobilising workers-councils in energy-intensive industries, and other labour unions, against a ‘CO2-tax’. They argued this would lead job losses as companies shifted their investments to lower cost regions (those without a CO2 tax). This publicly put substantial pressure on the FNV. While organised businesses did not manage to shift the debate back to their position (or fundamentally change the policy outcome) this illustrated how they use threats of job losses to drive a wedge between labour and environmental movements. The environmental movement responded by publishing reports illustrating that job loss will be minimal, and that it is more important to talk about a shift from jobs in energy intensive industries to jobs in the renewable value-chain. The challenge, therefore, is how to support significantly increased job-to-job to trainings, and trainings more broadly.

This coalition gave strength to the trade union movement as well as the environmental organisations, and led to a better climate agreement. Although there is still much work to be done, finding and focusing on shared values has been a critical step. Working together with respect for each other’s autonomy and independence has proven an extremely successful strategy, without the need to institutionalise the relationship any further. The partnership between FNV and Milieudefensie is continuing to develop, with a campaign on Just Transition planned for 2020.

## Reflections on experiences: Observations and tensions

Several key points emerged from the reflections on the process of building alliances in the different contexts represented at the meeting. Naturally, these do not reflect the full range of situations that different movements and alliances are facing – the participants here represented are only a part of all the robust movements, campaigns and alliances going on around the world right now. However, it is hoped that these reflections will resonate in other contexts and help to spark further analysis and discussion. To that end, this report first presents a few key observations gleaned from a discussion of the *process* of collaborative organising. The report goes on to discuss some of the core features or principles of just transition which emerged from the discussion.

### Alliances take different forms at different times

Participants began the workshop by reflecting on the different histories of struggle in their national and regional contexts. Participants from Latin America expressed the feeling that a close collaboration between labour movements and movements of environmental and territorial defence has been building for decades in their region. The collective struggles against free trade agreements and neoliberal globalisation, among others, provided a context for collaboration. Labour and environmental movements are distinct but not seen as fully separate or isolated, neither from each other nor from other peoples' movements. Rather, many non-labour movements nonetheless rely on people's identities as workers, and labour movements have long been politicised on a range of issues.

In Nigeria and South Africa, on the other hand, participants<sup>2</sup> noted that movements had worked together closely and organically during national independence and anti-apartheid struggles. This was followed, however, by a period with less frequent or structural collaboration. After some years of collaborating only on a relatively limited number of 'issues of national concern,' like corruption or the national minimum wage, labour and

environmental movements are once again beginning to build closer relationships and shared analyses. However, this movement was felt to be still relatively young. Issues like the minimum wage, corruption, and standard of living have shown a capacity to unite different organisations around common strategies and actions. As knowledge and awareness about environmental justice issues grows, labour movements and environmental justice movements are coming together to share knowledge and analyses, and collaborate in strategic alliances.

In the Netherlands, environmental and labour movements have both been part of a broad cultural 'left'. But, here too, close collaboration with strategic co-ordination, shared goals, and common analysis, while increasing, is still in its early days. Participants mentioned that labour and environmental movements are still regarded as somewhat separate, with a number of activists within the movements not necessarily seeing these issues as intimately connected. While they may support solidarity actions, many still regard environmental and labour issues as isolated problems, and support a division of labour between movements focusing on the different issues.

Fruitful collaborations are possible in all of these contexts, reflections revealed. It is important to recognise that relationships of solidarity and mutual support can be very important even where aspects of movements' or organisations' analyses, ways of organising or decision-making processes differ. However, such moments of collaboration can also provide an opportunity to develop and articulate a deeper shared analysis, as will be discussed further below in the 'principles of just transition'. Collective actions can give movements and organisations space to consider the structural relationships between seemingly separate struggles.

### Moments of crisis can catalyse deeper collaboration

Experiences in both Africa and Latin America revealed that disparate movements often draw closer together in the face of situations in which political and economic powers have strongly undermined people's rights and struggles. In Nigeria and South Africa independence and decolonisation struggles helped to forge alliances between groups in dangerous and extreme

circumstances, even where they were pursuing somewhat different goals. Likewise in Latin America, while authoritarian regimes and neoliberal governments posed serious risks to activists and presented many challenges for organising and action, they also led to united strategies and struggles based on common demands and analysis between disparate actors. This could be seen in the history of alliances in several countries, where resistance against neoliberal globalisation and collaborations around minimum wage and against structural adjustment policies, for example, helped to prompt new collaborations and alliances.

### Joint actions must reflect diverse priorities

Social movements are driven by the beliefs, interests, and needs of grassroots members. In the case of labour unions, this is often codified in their structures: members determine the interests and the campaigns of the union through a democratic system. In environmental justice organisations these accountability structures may be less formalised. This may be a matter of necessity to avoid state repression in contexts where environmental movements are criminalised.

Regardless of their formal structures, all of the organisations present nonetheless felt themselves to be strongly accountable to the interests, needs, and commitments of their members, which help to shape strategic goals. Building coalitions and alliances, therefore, must be done with the active engagement of the members. Many different factors can play into this, but developing and disseminating a shared analysis to confront power structures is critical. At the same time, it is also important that members can see the value of shorter-term strategic alliances for protecting and advancing their goals, whether these relate to environmental protection, fair wages, green energy, or decent working conditions.

### Building trust and shared strategies is a long-term process

Movements and organisations working on a just transition come from a variety of sectors and backgrounds. While this diversity can be an important strength, helping to grow a broad-based and representative movement, it also means that actors bring different political backgrounds, organising

strategies, beliefs, constituencies, and commitments. In this context, building political trust is a long-term process.

At the same time, different organisations within a movement may differ on key strategic questions. For example, discussions in sub-Saharan Africa, in the context of corruption within weak or untrustworthy state-owned institutions, have shown that while some actors favour revitalisation of public ownership, others may advocate certain forms of privatisation, seeing these as more viable pathways for saving and democratising part of a public institution. Participants found that building alliances was still possible in the face of these kinds of differences and indicated that models built around sharing knowledge or expertise could be especially fruitful. For example, unions in Nigeria have actively sought out information and training from environmental organisations, who are regarded as reliable experts on issues relating to climate and the environment. However, building deeper alliances rather than temporary partnerships or shared campaigns, requires a longer-term process of trust-building through collaborative work and shared strategies.

At the same time, labour and environmental justice organisations are collaborating not only with each other, but also with other organisations and actors within the same field, and with other sectors of civil society more broadly. In all of these spaces, more and less radical perspectives are represented. In all sectors of civil society there are actors who are pursuing relatively reformist agendas and are not committed to systemic change or who don't see this as a viable goal. Beyond helping to consolidate alliances between environmental justice and labour organisations, just transition may also have an important role to play in helping to constitute and theorise a broader 'radical pole' across different sectors of civil society.

### New alliances may face active opposition

The context of co-optation, mentioned above, means that organisations and new alliances may face active opposition from corporate actors, media, or governments when they work together to articulate a more radical vision of just transition. For example, in the Netherlands, following FNV

and Milieudefensie's alliance around the Climate Agreement, corporate opponents actively used the media to accuse alliance activities of being 'anti-jobs' or harmful to workers. Perceived differences of interest between labour and environmental movements may thus be exploited or inflamed by actors whose interests would be threatened by stronger alliances and joint analysis. Organisations' accountability to their members, and the importance of broader public opinion, means that these tactics can pose a threat to joint actions. Opinions may already be polarised within the membership, which can make it difficult for organisations to articulate a radical position on just transition while still keeping everyone on board. Participants therefore stressed the importance of actively combating these tactics. In the first place it is important to be clear, transparent, and public about collaborations, making sure to communicate to members and affected communities the reasons for an alliance. In the second place it is critical to engage with disinformation and fear-mongering by companies, politicians, and the media who try to paint job loss as an inevitable consequence of environmental action, and who implicitly support an agenda of endless economic growth. These narratives often obscure real threats to decent work and workers' rights from new power relations linked to emerging technologies and digital economies.

## Principles of a Just Transition

Reflecting on the experiences, challenges, and opportunities of alliances helps to illuminate some of the core principles of just transition. These are not intended to provide an exhaustive or finished definition of the term. But, these considerations emerged as some key features of a shared common understanding of just transition that is distinct from the narrower definitions being advanced by some states and TNCs. It is hoped that these principles will help to cast light on a vision of just transition that is more resistant to being co-opted or captured by actors who oppose systemic change.

## Just transition looks different in different places

The history of the climate crisis is also the history of capitalism and imperialism. Like the exploitation of labour, the costs and benefits of resource extraction, environmental destruction, and carbon emissions have been distributed unequally at both the global and the national scale. Some countries – and within countries some groups or actors – have benefited enormously at the expense of others, who have disproportionately borne the costs. Any discussion of just transition must be sensitive to the fact that these massive global and historical inequalities, and their continuation in the present, are part of what must be transformed to bring about a just and sustainable society. This means that just transition may mean very different things in different places.

For instance, participants observed, while reducing energy use is a critical concern in many areas of the global North, and an important pathway to reducing emissions, for many, especially in the global South, energy poverty is still a daily reality. Likewise, some actions to reduce consumption can become elitist austerity measures, being counterproductive in the context of inequality and extreme poverty still prevalent today – these interventions can make it impossible to satisfy the basic needs of historically and continually marginalised people. These inequalities are also reproduced within the geographic North and South: marginalised and peripheral communities in Europe and North America are also struggling with energy poverty in growing numbers, while (often Northern-owned) TNCs are responsible for massive greenhouse gas emissions in the geographic South. Just transition must therefore reckon with the realities and complexities of inequality.

Marginalisation and exploitation have global geopolitical aspects that must be addressed, without losing sight of other local and regional dynamics of exploitation. We must therefore orient our inquiries and actions towards resolving the question of how energy and resources should be used, by whom and for what purposes, rather than simplistically generalising from the conditions of global elites. This means, among other things, taking

seriously regenerative forms and ways of life, for example by supporting communities to access and control their local resources and energy sources rather than imposing high-tech solutions that tend to be capital, resource, and technology intensive. Because these high-tech solutions are often in the hands of predominantly Northern TNCs, they tend to reinforce unequal global dynamics, disempower countries and communities in the global South, and perpetuate energy dependency.

Likewise, while 'climate' at the global scale is an increasing focus of activism within urban movements in the global North, many marginalised communities are still struggling with the kind of localised environmental destruction that first gave rise to the language of 'environmental justice'. While it is clear that people in the global South are already suffering disproportionately from extreme weather events associated with the climate crisis, many are also struggling against destruction or dispossession of land and territories at the local level. Furthermore, in a growing number of cases, people are fighting destruction or appropriation of their land and resources in the name of the 'green economy' and other 'false solutions'. From the mining of rare earth metals for green energy technology; to destructive green energy projects like hydro dams, massive wind farms and monocultural biofuel plantations; to the establishment of sterile 'conservation zones' that exclude indigenous and traditional users of land and sea, false solutions to the climate crisis are deepening existing marginalisations and continuing the centuries-old trends of the extractive economy. Just transition is an unusually robust framework for addressing these challenges. However, to keep the term relevant at the global level, activists everywhere must be conscious of the diversity of situations globally; avoid 'carbon reductionism' that sees greenhouse gas emissions as the only problem with the current economic system; and recognise the many mutually reinforcing structural oppressions at play in our global energy and economic systems.

Finally, the different historical and political situations in different countries mean that action for a just transition may play out in different ways. In order for international collaboration to be effective, it is necessary to

recognise that differences in debt; technology; ownership of knowledge; patents; the relative strength of the state and TNCs; the level of (energy) democratisation, repression, authoritarianism or corruption and other factors may all impact on the kinds of political action that are appropriate. At the same time, we must be alert to new and emerging geopolitical dynamics including the risk that the fossil-driven conflicts of the 20th and early 21st centuries may be replaced by rare mineral- or water-driven politics and conflicts, driving the same kinds of resource wars, militarisation, and dispossession.

## Just transition is a class issue

The concept of just transition recognises that a number of major systemic factors have shaped our society and produced its current form, where the costs and benefits of economic activity are distributed unequally. One of the foundational axes of inequality is class. By class we mean the difference between people who are dependent on selling their own labour in order to make a living, and those who own the resources, tools, investment capital, and other means which allow them to buy, and profit from, those people's labour.

Among people who must work for a living, there can be important differences in financial privilege: people may have well or poorly paid work, good or poor working conditions, decent or precarious work, robust or weak access to social protections and safety nets, etc. These differences exist at the global scale, but also within a given country, city, or region. They often parallel and intersect with other forms of marginalisation: people belonging to racialised communities or marginalised genders, differently abled persons, or those with other subaltern identities are likely to be disproportionately represented among the least privileged workers, or excluded altogether from labour markets. These inequalities are not always recognized by organisers. This can be an obstacle for collective organising as critical issues for one group may not be on the agenda of more privileged workers.

Unions, which have historically succeeded in struggles for improved labour rights for their members, may be seen in some contexts as less representative of precarious, unemployed, seasonal, or marginalised workers, whose numbers have swelled in many places as a result of neoliberal policies.

However, while recognising the importance of solidarity in struggles for a range of different rights and protections, just transition aims to focus the conversation on the question of power. In other words, who controls, and who benefits from, society's use of its resources in relation to the energy system. Viewing the conversation from this angle means recognising that the current system concentrates power and the benefits of resource use with relatively few actors, while distributing the costs (including environmental destruction) across the majority, but with more impact on those who are more marginalised. This opens the door for a broader discussion of what both resource use and work ought to look like in a just society. Within this discussion there is room for a variety of different solutions to increase – or establish – democratic control and use of resources, and to ensure the full realisation of both labour and human rights. However it is important to foreground the question of work – including traditionally unpaid work like caring for children or elders, producing food for a household etc. Just transition poses the question: what kind of work, and what kind of livelihoods, should our energy system support?

## Just transition is a gender issue

Women and other marginalised genders bear the burden of the current energy system and are most exposed to rights violations, particularly in contexts of conflict and violence. Capitalism relies on and reinforces social hierarchies. These include, but are not limited to, patriarchal hierarchies so that the oppression of non-male people can be reinforced by other types of oppression including class and racially-based oppression. Both the costs of the current system and the costs of changes to the system tend to be displaced onto those who are oppressed by one or more existing hierarchy.

Misogynistic and patriarchal divisions of power must be reckoned with in discussions of just transition. As one participant observed, if we change the system without dismantling patriarchy, we leave in place the systems oppressing women.

Today, women disproportionately bear the burden of the climate crisis. After 'climate disasters', gender-based violence often increases, and women, trans, and non-binary people usually face the toughest route to recovery because they are more likely to be living in poverty already. Extractivism often exacerbates existing gender injustices, as benefits and costs from extractive projects are distributed unequally within communities and families. As the climate crisis intensifies these dynamics may become more critical: 80% of the people who have been displaced by the climate crisis so far are women.

Women's marginalisation is also related to structural issues in the way that the current economic system values and understands work. Care work, including the work of nurturing children and caring for sick or elderly community members, and of maintaining bodies, relationships, families, communities, and the environment is under-valued in our current economy, and is disproportionately assigned to women. Recognising the value of this 'reproductive' work, which has the regeneration of human life and society, rather than the production of goods for sale, as its main goal is an important touchstone for broader discussions of decent livelihoods. It is important to realise that patriarchal value systems which have historically considered this kind of work less valuable than 'productive' work, are part of the current system of oppression and have played a role in laying the groundwork for the current crisis.

The process of re-evaluating our society's use of energy, and reassessing which uses of energy we should value and preserve, must be sensitive to reproductive labour. Women's uses of energy, particularly in the home, have often been invisibilised and downplayed. Moreover, as income is usually not equally distributed within households, women are more at risk of energy poverty. Even more, the pressure of extractive economies is also a

pressure of the markets, which use women's bodies as commodities. It is therefore critical that a just transition does not deepen the marginalisation of women, for instance by making them disproportionately bear the burden of reduced energy use. Addressing the systematic undervaluation of reproductive work is a key step towards building a society and an economy with people and the planet at its centre.

At the same time, women are at the forefront of resistances, defending their rights and taking the lead in developing proposals for actual just transition. Women's often-undervalued innovations have an important role to play in showing the way towards people's solutions to the climate crisis. Traditionally patriarchal power structures have systematically excluded women and oppressed their views and use their bodies. Their views and perspectives on the problems confronting us, and their possible solutions, have therefore too often been suppressed or the transition has been used as an excuse to deepen the injustices. These provide a rich reservoir of possible systemic alternatives, which can easily be dismissed if an energy transition is allowed to continue along the patriarchal, extractive, technology-focused path set down by the fossil fuel economy. Feminist movements have exposed the roots of our destructive relationship with nature and the way of thinking that emphasises patriarchal views of 'power over' our environment. At the same time they have confronted this way of thinking with holistic alternatives that can help to build a genuinely transformative vision for a just transition based on sustainability of life.

## Just transition is an anti-racist framework

Historical and persisting patterns of inequality are based around implicit racist ideologies and practices, at the global and often at the national level. Racialised peoples disproportionately bear environmental costs, from poor black communities involved in decades-long struggles for environmental justice, to indigenous and peasant communities fighting for their traditional lands and territories, to countries of the global South which are systematically exploited by a colonial, imperialist economy built around the pillage

of their resources. In the era of the climate crisis, these dynamics are also becoming ever more visible in racist migration policies that aim to block the flight of climate refugees. The term 'environmental racism,' which encompasses many of these phenomena, was developed in the 1970s to describe the ways in which environmental costs are disproportionately born by racialised front-line communities, who are vastly more likely to live in the so-called 'sacrifice zones' of modern capitalism.

The racist elements of the current system, which manifest as racialised inequality, economic oppression under globalisation, and a wide variety of racist policies and practices at every level, must be a core target of the movement for a just transition. Questions of redress, redistribution, and reparations must be taken seriously in discussions of how we can transform the existing energy system and the society and economy that it sustains. People who have been most marginalised and exploited by the current system should co-determine the pathways towards a just transition and play a central role in decision making and agenda setting. This includes both indigenous peoples and other racialised groups. Otherwise, we risk perpetuating the same racist, elitist, extractive, imperialist system with alternative energy sources. Racist dynamics can easily be reproduced in a 'green' energy economy driven by TNCs that throw people off their lands, exploit nature and labour, and divert the profits to wealthy classes and northern cities while poor and southern communities face the social and environmental conflicts. Some elements of this dynamic are already visible as northern countries commit to 'going green' within their own borders while generally turning a blind eye to the destructive behaviour of their TNCs around the world.

At the same time, the vast history of resistance against imperialism, colonisation, and other abuses also demonstrates the critical role that subaltern communities can play in leading a just transition. Centuries of collective experience in resisting and rolling back the imperialist system have many lessons for movements for systemic change. In particular independence and decolonisation struggles in Africa, Australasia, and

the Americas have already played a critical role in shaping the concepts and tactics of environmental justice movements globally. Viewed from the standpoint of colonialism and imperialism, the systemic connections between economic, social, and environmental exploitation are revealed with unusual clarity. Subaltern communities, both in the global South and North, thus are already playing a critical role in developing the analysis and proposals for a just transition, and must continue to be at the centre of this work.

## Just transition is about more than just the climate

The environmental crisis is broader than a climate crisis. As mentioned above, focusing exclusively on emissions risks oversimplifying the current crisis. Many different forms of extraction around the world today are causing environmental catastrophes, perpetuating inequality, impinging on peoples' rights, and destroying both decent livelihoods and healthy ecosystems. Treating emissions as the only issue opens the door for false solutions that deepen other forms of environmental and social crisis in the name of mitigating climate change.

Rather than merely embracing green energy or carbon capture technologies, just transition involves fundamentally re-thinking our relationship to non-human life and to each other. A just transition means a transition from an economic system that is built around the extraction of resources and the exploitation of people, to one that is structured instead around the restoration and regeneration of territories and people's rights and dignity. Economic activities must be considered within ecosystems, at both the global and the local level. Just transition thus also poses the question: what kind of relationship with nature can sustain our lives, livelihoods – and 'well-living' (*buen vivir*) in the long term? What does it look like to use energy in ways that sustain both human and non-human life?

Indigenous knowledge and the work of territorial and environmental human rights defenders around the world are a critical source of knowledge for this project. Organised traditional rural communities around the world are fighting for their food sovereignty and struggling for agrarian reforms that

would allow them to practice livelihoods that don't depend on energy-intensive industrial systems. Indigenous communities around the world are engaged in ongoing struggles to protect their ways of life from capitalist expansion, and to defend a vision of an alternative relationship to nature. Often, these are based on world views that do not place people 'above' nature but instead see human beings as an integral part of nature, existing in an interdependent and cyclic relationship. The knowledge and practices of indigenous, peasant, afro-descendent and other traditional communities must be seen as one key building block towards a just transition. These struggles are important sites for solidarity from the broader movement, but they also offer much-needed examples of possible systemic alternatives.

## Just transition is about democracy

Democratisation is critical to a just transition in two ways. Firstly, environmental human rights defenders and territorial defenders are at risk from repression and criminalisation (by the state and other powers). In many places there is a growing trend towards authoritarian or right-wing governments that are eroding the rights of people on the front lines of environmental struggles. This has been visible in Latin America where strong-man leaders like Jair Bolsonaro have explicitly targeted environmental justice movements, but can also be seen all around the world in the mass criminalisation of environmental activists including, for example, the water defenders of Standing Rock. A democracy that protects people's civil and political rights and freedoms is an important minimum prerequisite for the kind of social and political mobilisation needed to bring about a just transition. The protection of people's basic rights, including economic, social and cultural rights like the right to food and the right to education, is critical for making effective, creative, representative and long-term campaigning for just transition possible.

At the same time, democratisation and accountability are fundamental parts of a just transition. Resources are currently exploited for the enrichment of a tiny percentage of people, and marginalised actors pay the price. Just transition draws on concepts like energy democracy and energy sovereignty to elaborate a vision of a world where people have access to and control over the resources they need to lead dignified lives, and have a political role in making decisions about how those resources are used, and by whom.

Promoting and defending democracy is core to a vision of just transition. In many regions environmental and resource struggles are intimately wrapped up in, or indistinguishable from, broader attacks on democracy and people's rights. Tackling violence and repression cannot be divorced from addressing urgent environmental questions, and fighting for genuine, engaged, substantive democracy cannot be divorced from the struggle for a just transition. The challenge to power at the centre of just transition means that it includes a commitment to transform decision making and accountability about resource use, public services and infrastructure, and other key issues in a democratic way. Peoples' control of their resources, utilities, public services, and governments, as well as regulatory measures to control corporate power, are critical. A vision of just transition is based around ensuring the equitable participation of all people in governing the use of energy and other resources, in order to guarantee meaningful access to the goods and services that serve as a basis for the enjoyment of all human rights (sanitation, health, education, water, food, transport, housing, etc). Some participants formulated this in terms of 'public domain ownership' or 'people-driven change'. As mentioned above, the mechanisms for this may vary significantly depending on the political, cultural, economic, and historical context. However, participants agreed that, while respecting traditional knowledge and livelihoods was critical, there was also a need to think beyond 'small is beautiful' and discuss solutions such as democratic public ownership models, which can deliver large-scale change quickly in some contexts.

There is a risk that the magnitude of the challenges we are facing may be co-opted by some actors to argue for increasingly authoritarian solutions. Robust proposals for large-scale democratic and participatory change are one important method for combating this. The concept of just transition therefore refers not only to the end goal of the transition – a just energy system, in harmony with natural systems and processes – but also to the process by which a transition must be brought about.

## Corporate capture & false solutions

As has been highlighted above, just transition is about changing the energy system, not simply the energy source. Actors who benefit from the current system generally oppose this kind of transformation. They are devoted to lobbying for a vision of transition which involves, primarily, the replacement of one fuel source with another, without addressing key questions related to property, scale, use, or distribution. Proponents of ‘green growth’ argue, implicitly or explicitly, that it is possible and desirable to preserve the basic structure of production and consumption intact, while making certain concessions to ‘sustainability’, for example by embracing agrofuels or renewable energy. In essence, proponents of a corporate transition aim to keep existing power relations in place, based on the use of a different energy source.

Just transition, on the other hand, sees the climate crisis as a manifestation of a broader systemic problem. Growing inequality, mass dispossession, deepening authoritarianism, corporate capture of democracy, and environmental destruction are different manifestations of the same broken system. Addressing the climate crisis without addressing its systemic causes is likely to be impossible, but it is also profoundly undesirable. This approach amounts to treating a single symptom of a larger disease, in a way that may even make other symptoms worse. For instance, a variety of high-tech green energy solutions, from solar panels to wind farms, are being implemented in the global South in ways that can deepen countries’ dependencies on TNCs and Northern countries, rather than supporting

energy democracy and sovereignty. These false solutions too often rely on employment models that promote and consolidate the precarization of work, relieve employers of their responsibilities towards workers, and pave the way to deepening exploitation of workers.

Certain key governments and TNCs are coming together behind a narrow vision of just transition that: focuses entirely on corporate-driven energy transition; positions the same TNCs that have contributed to creating the climate crisis as key actors in determining its 'solutions'; neglects critiques about environmental and social justice; and disregards or downplays the importance of democratic control and public property. Discussions of energy transitions and green energy that do not take seriously the considerations of social and environmental justice risk treating a single symptom while actually perpetuating the power dynamics and systemic features that have led to the current crisis.

Thinking about transformative change in the energy system requires us to go beyond energy policy as such and consider the economic and political structures that keep the current system in place. Trade and investment regimes play a key role in empowering corporations to defend their visions of green growth and to block people-driven movements for a just transition. The Investor State Dispute Settlement mechanisms, which are written into most trade and investment agreements today, provide tools for TNCs to block governments that try to implement environmental regulations that TNCs argue will harm their profits. The Energy Charter Treaty in particular offers a chilling example of the kinds of instruments that allow TNCs to push for their corporate energy systems and to stop positive change in its tracks. The current threat by German TNC Uniper to sue the Dutch government for its commitment to phasing out coal-based power generation by 2030 offers a striking example of the role this kind of legislation plays in protecting the most damaging aspects of the current energy system. The struggle for a just transition, therefore, requires looking seriously at the broader question of corporate capture of democracy.

# Conclusion

Instead of embracing capital-driven green growth, we need to think seriously about questions like: Energy and resources for whom? Work and energy for what? How much energy and for what purposes? Who controls it? How could energy, resources, and the distribution of labour in society be controlled in more just and democratic ways? How can we ensure that everyone has the means they need to lead a dignified life? How should our society make decisions about energy, public services and resource use? What kind of energy and resource use can support decent livelihoods and regenerative relationships with nature and territories? We need to break with the dogmatic conviction that continual growth is necessary, by re-framing economic discussions away from questions of profit and return on investment and towards questions about meeting human needs in a harmonious relationship within nature.

For this discussion to be genuinely transformative it needs to recognise and reckon with the histories of marginalisation, exploitation, and injustice that built, and sustain, our current energy system. Social movements around the world are struggling not only to fight against corporate power and environmental and territorial destruction but to fight for their freedom to construct and realise emancipatory visions. The discussion around just transition offers not only a framework for opposing injustice, but also the beginning of a potential shared framework for conceiving a more just and inclusive society, and a more respectful relationship with nature.

The collective construction of a vision of just transition is still in development. However, the emergence of a growing alliance of transnational movements for just transition is significant. Because of the global and systemic nature of the climate crisis, and the importance of global disparities, for example in historic emissions, a transnational vision is vital. But, as discussed above, this global vision must be alive to the diversity of different situations, and the diverse forms that just transition can take. Finally, deepening a shared collective analysis, which places class, racism, and gender at

the centre of the discussion, and recognises the critical role of marginalised communities, is critical for building a grassroots global movement for just transition.

This discussion represents just one of many such moments occurring globally. Nonetheless this conversation helped to draw out and emphasise shared agreement on a number of key critical points, including the fact that just transition, fundamentally, is about not just energy, but power. Participants emphasised the importance of a broad vision of social and political change, which is attentive to all forms of marginalisation, and which resists both corporate capture and narrow technical fixes. Finally, the discussion revealed some of the possibilities of just transition to serve as a unifying framework to bring together very different struggles and movements, revealing new pathways for solidarity and collaboration. As the effects of the climate crisis intensify, as authoritarian movements around the world become resurgent, and as corporations move to profit from false solutions and portray themselves as environmental saviours, this conversation could not be more necessary – or more urgent.

## Endnotes

- 1 Lusten en lasten eerlijk verdelen, juli 2018, Milieudefensie, Natuur & Milieu, de Natuur en Milieufederaties, Greenpeace, ODE Decentraal, FNV, de Woonbond, ActionAid, Oxfam Novib, Both ENDS, TNI en De Jonge Klimaatbeweging
- 2 Participants from South Africa were unfortunately unable to join this meeting due to circumstances beyond their control. However, participants who had collaborated with South African organisations on campaigns and actions shared some insights from this region, which are included here. Because participants were unable to share their experiences directly we have not included a separate case study on the South African case, although there are robust and dynamic collaborations happening in that context as well.



**Amigos de  
la Tierra**  
América Latina  
y el Caribe



CSA  
TUCA

  
**milieudefensie**  
anders kijken, anders kiezen