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JUST TRANSITIONS: DELIVERING ON PROMISES OR FACING
AN OVERARCHING ABYSS?

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Abstract

Climate change looms as an ever-growing concern, casting a long shadow over the sustainability of our future. With each passing day, the daunting task of finding solutions to avert impending catastrophe weighs heavily on the shoulders of policymakers. Yet, amidst this urgent crisis, some nations are diligently striving to navigate these turbulent waters, seeking the ultimate remedy to ensure a smoother transition toward sustainability.

However, many existing policies appear to be floundering, struggling to establish a solid foundation in our less-than-ideal world. Take, for instance, the ambitious promises of the Paris Agreement; these bold commitments seem to falter under the harsh realities of unpredictable climate conditions. The gap between aspiration and action is widening, leaving many to question whether we can truly anchor ourselves in a sustainable future.

This paper aims to meticulously scrutinize the effectiveness and success rates of key just transition policies and legislation currently in play. By examining various national and international frameworks, we shall be assessing their impact on fostering equitable transitions for marginalized communities. Furthermore, it shall endeavour to propose enhancements to existing frameworks and curate a comprehensive guideline for crafting effective and pragmatic legislation focused on just transitions.

In doing so, this research seeks to illuminate critical issues that hinder progress while offering actionable recommendations for policymakers. By addressing both environmental concerns and social justice, we might be able to pave the way for climate action that uplifts communities and fosters inclusivity. The journey toward a just transition is not merely an environmental imperative;

it is a moral obligation that demands our immediate attention and concerted effort from all stakeholders involved. Together, we can create a resilient future that benefits everyone.

Introduction

The rapid warming of the Arctic is jeopardizing the delicate ecosystems of tundras, while the coral reefs of the Great Barrier Reef are facing alarming declines (AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023)^[1]. These examples underscore the extensive evidence of climate change wreaking havoc on Earth's ecosystems at both macro and micro levels. The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicates that global temperatures are rising more swiftly than previously anticipated^[2]. Projections suggest that within the next two decades, we may reach a critical temperature threshold of 2.0°C^[3], which shall have catastrophic consequences for our planet. The status quo highlights an urgent need to pursue a Just Transition. The idea finds its origin in the North American continent. In the 1970s, The Labour Union in America came up with this seed with the objective of protecting the vulnerable/marginalised section of the society from bearing the down side of environmental laws, legislations etc. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defined this concept as “Greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind.”^[4] The fundamental essence of a Just Transition lies in guaranteeing that as society moves towards sustainable practices, every individual is supported and no one experiences negative consequences from initiatives aimed at mitigating climate damage. While this vision may initially appear idealistic or utopian, numerous nations are claiming to actively strive to transition from environmentally harmful practices to greener alternatives—though their commitment often remains questionable. For example, how South Africa established the Presidential Climate Commission and a Just Transition Framework to evaluate potential job market impacts, propose relevant skill development programs, and ensure the involvement of all stakeholders, particularly through consultations with communities that will be most impacted by the transition^[5]. It can be inferred from it that Just transition isn't solely limited to the role of legislators, it also means to include all the stakeholders in the decision-making process, especially the vulnerable marginalised section of the societies^[6]. Hence, this paper aims to critically analyse and explore the effectiveness and success rates of implementing Just Transition policies across various contexts. By examining these frameworks, we will assess their impact on fostering equitable transitions and propose actionable recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness. Ultimately, this research seeks to illuminate obstacles hindering progress while advocating for a Just Transition that not tackles environmental issues but also emphasizes the importance of social justice and equity.

Paris agreement – a landscape for Just Transition

Arbitrary decision- making is not an effective approach of translating ideas into action, especially if the task at hand needs to be done on a bigger level. Here comes the policies into play. They are

effective way of meticulously orchestrating a highly pragmatic framework that can be implemented in the real world. However, there is no assurance that the policy will be successful, as its success ultimately lies in the hands of those who are responsible for it. Starting forth with the Paris agreement.

Central to the Paris Agreement is the concept of Just Transition, which ensures that the shift to a green economy is inclusive and fair for all. The idea and terms are mentioned in its preamble, though it is important to note that the preamble does not carry any legal weight^[7]. Prior to COP 26 and COP 27, the focus of Just Transition primarily centred on the working class^[8], particularly labour and related sectors. COP 27 witnessed the transformed ambit of the concept. There was now inclusion of marginalised communities, women, indigenous communities, etc^[9]. Henceforth, resulting the creation of Just Transition Work Program^[10]. It aims to focus on equitable, people-first strategies that foster fairness, generate employment opportunities, and safeguard marginalized populations. It shall attempt to tackle global disparities, certifying that the developed countries contribute financial and technical assistance to the regions most impacted. The initiative aims to be adaptable to national contexts while considering social inequities, such as those based on gender and age. Finally, the JTWP aims to work in harmony with other climate efforts to enhance international collaboration and exchange successful strategies for an inclusive, enduring transformation. Given its nascent stage, the path forward remains under construction, with work ongoing to address the finer intricacies; full implementation is yet to come. Similarly, national commitments, such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), are critical for ensuring that each country plays its part in achieving a global Just Transition. It is a guideline submitted by every country, how they shall reduce its contribution of Global warming. Starting with India, fastest growing country, aims to reduce its net emissions to zero by the year 2070. One such step in this direction is the initiative by the Ministry of Coal, which has reached out to seek assistance from UNDP and UNECE^[11], in reskilling coal miners in Jharkhand and Odisha. The aim is to help these workers transition from fossil fuel-based energy production to renewable energy^[12], particularly solar power, by providing them with skills in solar certification and other related fields. A similar initiative can be parallelly seen in Germany. Germany's *Energiewende*^[13] program aims to cut off dependence from fossil fuel while moving more towards renewable energy^[14], while ensuring balancing the objective with a commitment to social fairness, ensuring job protection and offering support to communities impacted by the transition. Another example of national commitment is Costa Rica^[15], where the government has placed a strong emphasis on social impact in its climate policies. In the year 2018, they launched a National Decarbonisation Plan, essentially decarbonising the economy by 2050. The idea of Just Transition was incorporated the following year. The actual manifestation of its implementation was seen post covid recovery, when with the help of UNDP, the country's government after interacting with all the stakeholders came to the conclusion that centring the actions around just transition will create more job opportunities as well as push them in a more sustainable direction^[16], leading forth working towards it. In summary, nations worldwide are increasingly recognizing the necessity of transitioning to environmentally friendly and sustainable economies in response to the pressing challenges posed by climate change

and social inequities. Many are adopting just transition policies designed to foster ecological sustainability while ensuring that vulnerable communities are supported throughout this process. However, most of these initiatives remain in their early phases, making it challenging to evaluate their overall success and impact accurately. Each country encounters distinct obstacles, such as political opposition and limited resources, which can impede progress. Consequently, while there is encouraging momentum toward sustainability, the path ahead is still developing, highlighting the need for continuous assessment, flexibility, and cooperation among all parties involved.

Impact on Marginalized Communities

The concept of a Just Transition is increasingly recognized as essential in addressing the disparities faced by marginalized communities during the shift to a low-carbon economy. This transition aims not only to mitigate climate change but also to ensure that vulnerable populations—such as low-income families, indigenous groups, and those reliant on fossil fuel industries—are actively included in the process. The analysis of the impact of Just Transition on these communities reveals critical insights into the systemic inequities they face and highlights both successful and unsuccessful strategies for inclusivity.

Vulnerabilities of Marginalized Communities

Marginalized populations are disproportionately affected by climate policies designed to facilitate energy transitions. A report focusing on coal-dependent regions in India illustrates this point, noting that many individuals lack access to education and alternative livelihoods, rendering them particularly vulnerable during the transition away from coal.[\[17\]](#) This situation is exacerbated by caste-based disparities, where marginalized groups encounter significant barriers to education and employment opportunities. The correlation between caste and educational attainment is stark; households with limited or no education are predominantly from marginalized backgrounds, further entrenching their vulnerability.[\[18\]](#)

Case Studies: Successes and Failures

India's Initiatives

In an effort to address these challenges, initiatives supported by Climate Investment Funds aim to integrate Just Transition principles into energy transitions. These initiatives emphasize community involvement in policy-making processes, recognizing that local engagement is crucial for successful implementation. However, despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. For instance, many coal-dependent communities continue to face administrative negligence and inadequate public services, which hinder their ability to transition effectively.[\[19\]](#)

South Africa's Exclusion Issues

Conversely, South Africa presents a cautionary tale regarding Just Transition efforts. Despite the establishment of a Just Energy Transition Partnership, marginalized communities have reported feeling excluded from negotiations concerning resource management and benefit distribution. This

exclusion fosters perceptions of green initiatives as ineffective or merely performative if they fail to deliver tangible benefits.^[20] The lack of meaningful participation can lead to disenfranchisement and skepticism towards climate policies.

Successful Models: Scotland's Approach

In contrast to the challenges faced in South Africa and India, Scotland's proactive approach through Just Transition Commissions exemplifies a successful model of community engagement. These commissions facilitate social dialogue among stakeholders, ensuring that marginalized voices are included in discussions about economic opportunities arising from the transition.^[21] This inclusive approach has led to the development of job training programs tailored specifically to meet the needs of affected populations. By prioritizing local input and fostering collaboration between various stakeholders—including government entities, businesses, and community organizations—Scotland has demonstrated how effective engagement can yield positive outcomes for marginalized communities.

The Just Transition framework offers a pathway toward addressing the inequalities exacerbated by climate change policies. However, its effectiveness hinges on recognizing and actively involving marginalized communities in decision-making processes. By prioritizing their needs and ensuring equitable participation, societies can work towards a more just and sustainable future. The experiences from various regions underscore the importance of inclusive strategies that not only aim for environmental sustainability but also promote social equity—ensuring no one is left behind in the transition to a greener economy.

Barriers and Challenges to Effective Implementation

The effective implementation of Just Transition initiatives faces significant barriers and challenges that can hinder progress towards equitable and sustainable climate policies. Political, economic, and social obstacles are primary factors that complicate the transition process. Politically, there is often a lack of consensus among stakeholders, including government entities, businesses, and civil society. This fragmentation can result in conflicting agendas where climate goals are deprioritized in favor of short-term economic interests. For instance, in South Africa, the high unemployment rate, coupled with deep-seated inequalities, creates resistance to policies perceived as threatening livelihoods. The necessity for strong political will is crucial; without committed leadership from policymakers, Just Transition efforts may lack the necessary support and resources for meaningful change.^[22]

Economically, the transition to a low-carbon economy requires substantial investment in new technologies and infrastructure. This need can strain public budgets and deter private investment, particularly in regions heavily reliant on fossil fuel industries. Communities that depend on these industries often resist change due to fears of job losses and economic instability. For example, the transition away from coal can exacerbate vulnerabilities for communities reliant on fossil fuel supply chains, increasing financial insecurity for those involved in extraction processes. The

challenge is further compounded by existing economic inequalities that limit access to resources necessary for adaptation to new job markets created by renewable energy initiatives.[\[23\]](#) [\[24\]](#)

Social obstacles also play a critical role in hindering effective implementation. Many marginalized communities may not fully understand the benefits of transitioning to a sustainable economy or may feel excluded from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. This lack of engagement can foster distrust towards governmental initiatives and hinder collaboration among stakeholders. Additionally, social inequalities based on race, gender, and class can exacerbate vulnerabilities during the transition. For instance, women working in fossil fuel industries often have fewer opportunities for re-skilling and re-employment compared to their male counterparts. Addressing these disparities proactively is essential to ensure that Just Transition initiatives do not inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities.[\[25\]](#) [\[26\]](#)

Institutional capacity and governance issues further complicate the implementation of Just Transition strategies. Many organizations involved in these initiatives may lack the necessary expertise or resources to effectively manage the complexities of transitioning away from fossil fuels. Local governments may be under-resourced or lack experience in facilitating such changes, leading to ineffective governance structures that fail to promote collaboration among various stakeholders. The need for effective governance mechanisms that encourage cross-sectoral cooperation is paramount; however, establishing these structures can be challenging in practice.

Lessons learned from past experiences underscore the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement and transparent communication. Successful case studies demonstrate that proactive approaches involving local communities in decision-making processes can lead to more equitable outcomes. For instance, South Africa's Just Energy Transition Partnership has highlighted the need for comprehensive stakeholder consultations to build trust and ensure diverse perspectives are considered in policy development.[\[27\]](#) Conversely, failures often stem from inadequate engagement with marginalized groups or insufficient attention to their specific needs during the transition process.

Furthermore, economic transitions can drive up energy prices and contribute to inflationary pressures if not managed carefully. As governments invest heavily in renewable energy infrastructure and eliminate subsidies for fossil fuels, there is a risk of opposition from populations facing increased costs of living. Without targeted efforts to mitigate direct adverse impacts on workers and coal-dependent communities, public opposition could derail progress toward a Just Transition.

Conclusion

After carefully observing and critically evaluating the different initiatives undertaken by several nations, the burden disproportionately falls on developing and least developed countries (LDC). Historically, developed nations have a more pronounced contribution in compromising the planet's

wellbeing, consequently, out of obligation, they should actively engage in mitigating the hardships and obstacles. For example, the concept of industrialisation found its origin in UK, further it was the European imperialist powers who exhausted the natural resources of their colonies for development of their own nation. It is important to hold them accountable for actions otherwise the principles of fairness, justice, equality, etc shall falter even before being enacted. One of the ways the developed nations like US, UK etc can be better contributors is through financing the developing nations or LDCS as the process is very expensive and requires substantial amount of funds to successfully carry out the plan. They can also contribute by partaking in the fieldwork required to be done as this reduce the time that would go in planning. Further, there should collaborative initiative in the field of R&D not only focus on the transition but also for sustaining the greener shift in the short and long run. This shift shall prove to be more helpful in aiding this global initiative of Just transition in a more effective and pragmatic way. These are just some of the ways to ensure better participation by the developed countries. More meticulous attention needs to be devoted to the social implications of the transition. The focus solely shouldn't be on focusing on reskilling the workers or change their area of profession absolutely. There should proper funding and aiding executed to help the vulnerable section of the society to navigate this transition. There should also be development of new educational & reformation programmes for the children that contributes to the improvement of the vulnerable communities of the society, uplifting them for the long run. There should be greater awareness among the people of every stratum of the society regarding the current state of the environment as in real life such concepts are only known to exist among the upper class and upper middle class. It is important to note that these suggestions are derived from observations and inferences based on the current status quo. As these initiatives progress beyond their nascent stages, the path forward will become clearer, free from uncertainties and contingencies.

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[19] *Id*

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[27] *Supra* note 22.