



Briefing note 1

What is Just Transition?

It is now well-recognised by governments (at several levels) and by states (at international level) that the nature of the threat to society and to planetary life that climate change poses, requires profound and urgent responses.¹ In this context the concept of ‘Just Transition’ has emerged in several legal and governance instruments, in different policy domains, and at different levels, to describe the nature of these responses. Yet, the normative meaning and juridical value of the concept remain unclear, while its implications for governance responses to climate change remain fragmented and, where elaborated, are frequently grafted onto existing top-down modalities of governance.²

One authoritative definition already within governance discussions is the IPCC’s carbon reduction-centred definition of Just Transition.³

“The Just Transition framework refers to a set of principles, processes and practices aimed at ensuring that no people, workers, places, sectors, countries or regions are left behind in the move from a high-carbon to a low-carbon economy. It includes respect and dignity for vulnerable groups; creation of decent jobs; social protection; employment rights; fairness in energy access and use and social dialogue and democratic consultation with relevant stakeholders.[.]”

[E] ensur[ing] that any negative social, environmental, or economic impacts of economy-wide transitions are minimised, whilst benefits are maximised for those disproportionately affected. These proactive measures include eradication of poverty, regulating prosperity and creating jobs in ‘green’ sectors. In addition, governments, polluting industries, corporations, and those more able to pay higher associated taxes, can pay for transition costs by providing a welfare safety net and adequate compensation to people, communities, and regions that have been impacted by pollution, or are marginalised, or are negatively impacted by a transition from a high- to low-carbon economy and society.”

- ¹ On the former, governance instruments like Climate Action Plans at multiple levels (e.g., municipal, regional, provincial and networks of these); sectoral plans for public policy approaches in areas like energy, water management etc, as well as industry-focused sectors like construction, mining, fisheries etc. are now widespread. On the latter, by now, states have signed multiple international treaties on that specifically address climate change, and other related areas such as those relating to biodiversity, the environment, the sea and on human rights. The provisions of these treaties have been transposed into domestic law in several jurisdictions. Increasingly, in recent years, the nature of legal and public policy obligations and responsibilities of States and governments under those international treaties and under domestic legal and policy commitments have been further examined and elaborated in courts at national, regional and international levels. See the Grantham Research Institute for Climate Change and the Environment [here](#) for examples of laws and judicial decisions.
- ² The history of the concept, and its evolution and use over time, are worth noting for how it has come to be used (and not used) today. See the bibliography for resources on Just Transition that we found helpful in writing this report.
- ³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022 Mitigation of Climate Change, Working Group III contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, (IPCC, 2022), at 75. Available [here](#).

Though we welcome that this definition clearly identifies key actors, sectors, means and outcomes of Just Transition, we caution that its carbon reduction-centred focus risks overlooking links between contemporary mal-effects of climate change, and pre-existing mechanisms of inequality, disadvantage and exclusion. This singular focus creates risks of new inequalities emerging, and/or risks of calcification and exacerbation of existing inequalities, from implementing low-carbon initiatives.

Thus, for this project, though we recognise the centrality of the legacy of fossil fuel use to Just Transition responses, our understanding of Just Transition also goes beyond a carbon use-centric approach. Our understanding of Just Transition is

“[a] systemic turn, through genuine democratic means, away from exploitation, extraction, and alienation, and towards a systems of production and reproduction that are focused on human well-being and the regeneration of ecosystems. Just Transition, as we envision it, is much more than a shift from fossil fuels and towards renewable or green energy sources. It is, rather, a profound transformation of our society that seeks to put humanity into a harmonic balance with the earth, its ecological systems, the multitude of species that we share this fragile planet with — and one another.”⁴

This concept of Just Transition locates the recognised need to reduce reliance on fossil fuels within a wider political economic context that implies questioning and seeking to alter the extractive economic relations of our increasingly financialised, capitalist modes of production, in addition to politically de-centering the primacy of markets and commodification as the *de facto* modality of responding to society’s needs.

⁴ Kali Akuno, Katie Sandwell, Lyda Fernanda Forero & Jaron Browne, *From Crisis to Transformation: What is Just Transition? A Primer*, (Grassroots Global Justice Alliance & Transnational Institute: 2022), at 4-5. Available [here](#). Several more detailed definitions of Just Transition now exist – see bibliography for some examples.

Excerpt from Siobhán Airey, Yağız Eren Abanus, Hüseyincan Eryılmaz & Daniela García-Caro Briceno, *Towards a Just Transition - Walking practices & Legal possibilities* (ESL-CSJ: 2025), 25. Report available [here](#).

For any follow-up on this report, please contact:

Dr. Siobhán Airey, airey@law.eur.nl

Erasmus School of Law, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Hüseyincan Eryılmaz, huseyincan.eryilmaz@mekandaadalet.org

Center for Spatial Justice

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