Towards a just transition: WHAT DOES THIS REALLY MEAN FOR CITIES AND TOWNS?

ICLEI Europe has long sought to ensure that ambitious climate action – with the goal of climate neutrality – is equitable and just for all. Yet what this entails in practice is not always self-evident, particularly when applying a justice lens across various topics and policy areas.

The term can be messy and contested, widely used but oftentimes loosely and centring on the user’s individual agenda. While there appears to be widespread agreement regarding the danger of an unjust transition, questions remain regarding the exact nature of a just transition. Without further clarification, the term risks becoming a hollow buzzword, rather than a guiding concept.

The only topic around which just transition has begun to crystallise is in the urgent transition of coal regions towards a more sustainable future. The recognition that such a transition has profound social and economic consequences for these regions and their inhabitants is warmly welcomed. Yet limiting the debate to this context says little about wider distributive consequences of the transition for the majority of people who do not live in coal regions. On a highly urbanised continent, an inclusive understanding needs to also clarify what a just transition means for its urban residents generally.1

Fortunately there exist many insightful resources, definitions, guiding principles and key messages to support cities to ensure that their sustainability transformations are just for all. In order to cut through the confusion and understand our own role in this shifting landscape ICLEI’s Justice, Equity and Democracy team read, compared, and contrasted some of the key literature in this debate. The aim being to use this to determine the definitions, principles, opportunities, and key messages that guide our understanding of a “just transition”.

These are synthesised in the sections that follow. First, an introduction sets the scene, defining key terms and laying out the role that cities should play in building sustainable and just futures. Next, a series of principles are detailed, which can guide cities and their partners as they advance their work on equitable and just sustainability transitions. Finally, we share six overarching lessons that can help all members of the ICLEI Europe community as they navigate building (more) sustainable and just cities.

1 Ritchie & Roser (2018).
INTRODUCTION

“Transition is assured, justice is not”2

As the scope and speed of transitions towards sustainability increases, the potential for policies to exacerbate existing patterns of injustice, or even give rise to new ones, emerges as a critical concern. The benefits and burdens of transitions towards net zero must be equitably distributed if we are to ensure the ultimate success of such transitions.

While the European Commission typically uses the phrase ‘just transition’ (JT) to refer specifically to coal and carbon-intensive regions that are transitioning to more sustainable economies (see, for example, the Just Transition Platform, Just Transition Fund, and Just Transition Mechanism), this position paper broadens its scope. Current attempts to transition towards net zero are rapidly shifting social and political processes, with important questions about the concurrent costs and benefits of such changes.

The local level is a flashpoint, where broad policy agendas intersect with peoples’ lives. At the same time, local governments and their stakeholders often struggle to foster a transition to sustainability that is also just. Furthermore, much of the discussion to date on justice in sustainability transitions has neglected the local level, instead focusing on the role of national and regional actors.

Even the European Green Deal itself has been critiqued for sidelining justice to the JT Fund and associated mechanisms, rather than comprehensively integrating it into the Deal’s eight action areas. These same critical voices call for a bottom-up, community-driven transition.

What does justice mean?

“The people will not unite behind science – they will unite behind justice.”3

Justice is typically defined by at least three core dimensions:

| Distributional justice speaks to costs, responsibilities, and benefits being spread equally across society | Procedural justice speaks to inclusive access to decision-making processes | Recognition justice speaks to recognition of everyone’s equal dignity |

Picture the implementation of a new metro line, for example. Distributional justice would demand that it be accessible to low-income neighbourhoods. Procedural justice would ensure that the route-planning is conducted via an inclusive participatory

3 Laurent (2019).
process. Recognition justice would acknowledge and seek to address persistent inequalities in access to public transit and over exposure to traffic pollution by low-income groups. It could also recognise how the identities of riders (like women, LGBTQ+ people, migrants) influence their experiences of safety, accessibility, affordability on the new metro line. Furthermore, bringing in the principles of Environmental Justice demand that we ensure construction and management of the new metro line does not negatively impact part of the community, through, say, emissions, noise pollution or environmental degradation.

The European Pillar of Social Rights, announced in November 2017, also offers a set of 20 social justice principles that signal the EU’s commitment to justice, and recent research advocates for their systematic inclusion in the European Green Deal in order for the EU to be a true leader in just sustainability.4

A bit of history

1970s
Trade unions advocate for tackling environmental degradation without undermining worker rights.

2015
At COP21, the just transition concept was included in the Paris Agreements’ preamble.

2018
At COP24, the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration was adopted in the Paris Agreement.

2023
In the synthesised Sixth Assessment Report from the IPCC, JT processes are highlighted as enablers of climate adaptation, mitigation and resilient development, particularly for the people and places with highest vulnerability to climate hazards.

Cities’ role in just transitions

“As the governance level closest to citizens, local governments are a key factor in realising the lofty ambitions of the European Green Deal.”

To reach climate targets on an urban continent, we need everyone on board. Cities have consistently demonstrated that they are climate leaders, committed to more ambitious climate policy measures than many of their national counterparts. As such, local officials can act as a transformative force and enabler of cooperation. European cities are therefore essential in ensuring public buy-in, and tapping into innovation to catalyse local change.

However, cities’ agency to act is limited, since net zero and JT frameworks are often set at the EU and national level. Cities also tend to be underfunded and dependent on the allocation of funding from national levels.

The push for Local Green Deals responds to the above challenges and highlights the need for better-integrated horizontal and vertical governance in the transition. Cities need agency, new financial and legal frameworks, and to be enabled to work alongside national and EU leaders to implement plans at the local level.

JUST TRANSITION PRINCIPLES

All journeys need a guide, especially one of this scale and importance. ICLEI Europe, the Stockholm Environmental Institute, the European Alliance for a Just Transition, and the Climate Justice Alliance, to name a few, have each developed JT principles (click their names to access each resource). Although they differ in tone and emphasis, all share common themes:

- Actively encourage decarbonisation and clean up environmental damage.
- Deliver global climate justice and international cooperation. Consider planetary boundaries and acknowledge that local, regional, national, and international solidarity is key for addressing connected problems and solutions.
- Ensure that justice permeates all EU, national, regional and local transition policies. These policies should be based on human rights, diversity and inclusion frameworks, and the best available science. They should ensure that local culture and tradition are maintained.
- Uphold self-determination through policy generation and decision-making using inclusive and transparent processes that pay special attention to historically excluded groups.
- Support alternative economic models focused on non-growth, sustainable finance, taxation, wealth distribution, ethical digitalisation, and others, so that economies are regenerative, circular, and equitable.
- Tackle existing economic and social inequalities, particularly by enabling equal distribution of environmental public goods, and equal protection from human and natural hazards.
- Provide basic care and decent work, spanning food, affordable housing, healthcare, and meaningful employment, in order to eradicate poverty and increase well-being. This is especially critical in regions hit hardest by transition-related closures and downscaling.
- Enable transformative capacity building and reskilling, so that peer-learning and multilevel governance are better able to push forward a JT. Both formal and informal affordable education and life-long learning should be provided.
- Support community action for a JT, facilitating access to EU funding and exploiting opportunities for collaboration between communities and their local governments. This reflects the spirit of Buen Vivir, where community ties and rights are paramount.
KEY MESSAGES FOR ICLEI EUROPE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
EMBARKING ON A JUST TRANSITION

Driven by its Principles for Sustainable Just Cities, ICLEI Europe has created valuable knowledge, experience and partnerships though many multi-disciplinary projects relevant to the just transition: UrbanA, UrbanCommunity, CINTRAN, EC², and a variety of Local Green Deal initiatives like Fair Local Green Deals, CLIMAA, ALLIANCE and NetZeroCities.

I. Forecast and Pre-empt Long-term Challenges

Cities should engage in forecasting activities as, in the long run, they strengthen resilience and flexibility in the face of change. They are an important tool for the identification of the costs and opportunities provided by emerging sectors and economies, and in understanding the uneven impact that these might have on parts of the population.

Cities can draw on the Urban Innovative Action’s 2022 Just Transition report – Skills for a green future, which considers the various innovative ways in which cities are responding to the transition’s redistributive effects on local labour markets. The report provides examples and analysis of 24 innovative case studies from across Europe related to forecasting, facilitating growth of green jobs, and re-skilling.

II. Claim Power for Local Governments

As stated in the Mannheim Message, greater financial autonomy and political inclusion are decisive enablers of transition policy implementation by local governments.

Collaboration and networking with organisations active in Brussels, such as ICLEI, represents a great opportunity for cities to engage in lobbying activities, and to see their needs and wishes communicated clearly to European Institutions.

Cities should argue for a reorientation of funding to the local level, for projects which continue to lock-in a carbon-intensive status quo, such as road infrastructure. For example, the non-profit organisation Lausitzer Perspektiven, which works on just transition in the former lignite mining region of Lusatia (Germany and Poland), argues for the establishment of National Just Transition Agencies with regional branches, to provide closer access for local stakeholders to information and policy making processes.

In order to access funds from the European Commission’s Just Transition Fund, European Member States (i.e. the national level) had to create and submit Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs), which outline their plans to phase-out fossil fuel related activities and decarbonise greenhouse gas-intensive processes and production. The local level and other stakeholders must have easier access to, and greater transparency regarding, ongoing TJTPs and their processes. This could be done by pressuring national governments to expand beneficiaries or define alternative forms of JT support.

References available upon request.
Please contact: justtransition-europe@iclei.org
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III. Create Capacity in Your Municipality

Greater political inclusion and a shift of power toward lower levels of government must be matched by the creation of capacity at the local level. In fact, the implementation of processes aimed at fostering a JT require consistent and structural investment of resources, both organisational and financial.

The designation of an office and human resources dedicated to a JT would facilitate the institutionalisation and coordination of efforts, and the systemic integration of just principles into governmental activities. Moreover, this would foster accountability and transparency, together with the establishment of a system of checks and balances aimed at ensuring the pursuit of sustainable and just societies and environments.

IV. European Green Deal, but Make it Local

Locally-driven and coordinated transitions tend to fare better than those coordinated by national governments. Thus, while financial and other policy support needs to come from national governments and the EU, these should facilitate the creation of context-specific plans developed at the local scale.

ICLEI Europe is seeking to test and implement such localisation processes through the Local Green Deals concept, which is currently being implemented in a number of pilot cities across Europe. The core philosophy here is an integrated approach that cities can use to coordinate and deliver their existing sustainability policies and initiatives more effectively and inclusively. They aim to establish agreements between the local government and its urban society, specifically key stakeholders including private companies and civil society organisations, without whom the city as a whole cannot achieve the sustainable development goals and specifically climate neutrality.

Participation in Local Green Deal processes will also provide cities with a better understanding of gaps and funding shortfalls, allowing them to better advocate for the resources they need from national and EU levels, and for increased access to existing funding sources, such as the Just Transition Fund. Cities on a regional and national level can also work in clusters to identify shared needs and concerns, and to speak with one voice in their advocacy efforts.
V. Take an Intersectional, Participatory Perspective

Strongly linked to this is the need to ensure that city policies are reflective of, and provide for, diverse urban populations.

The needs of different groups can only be adequately ascertained if their voices are heard within public debates. Therefore, public participation procedures should be strengthened, and an intersectional perspective taken, especially considering the potential impact of such transitions on specific, already marginalised demographics.

For instance, People Powered, in collaboration with the World Research Institute, proposes the following techniques for bolstering inclusive decision-making:

- **Participatory policymaking**, which entails residents proposing, debating, and voting on new policies and policy changes, to more closely align climate policies with public opinion
- **Deliberative practices** like climate juries and assemblies, to expand representation and create more inclusive policies
- **Legislative theatre**, in which communities, advocates and policymakers work together, to identify, develop, and build support for new legislation, to bring those directly affected by climate change into debate with policymakers
- **Participatory budgeting**, to enable communities to dictate how to allocate public money, including for climate actions that create jobs, improve health, etc.

While these approaches have been repeatedly discussed and even implemented in certain places, a Local Green Deal approach can hopefully improve public participation processes by helping cities identify gaps where such techniques can be effectively applied.
VI. Apply a Social Justice Lens

The achievement of just results requires sets of measures able to go “Beyond GDP” to address the many social, environmental, cultural and economic dimensions that interact as part of transition processes and initiatives.

For instance, the UrbanA Question Tool, developed as part of the UrbanA project, provides questions to help guide the initiation, implementation and assessment of different measures. The questions revolve around seventeen cross-thematic and interdependent dimensions, including accessibility, power distribution and finance, such as: “How are you ensuring the financial, cultural, and physical accessibility of your sustainability approach? (e.g. safety for minorities to access green spaces)?”; “How is your initiative financed? Does it create decent jobs (e.g. contribute to social and economic stability of workers)?” or “What steps can be taken to enable those lacking power?”.

The Mannheim Message outlines integrated and multi-dimensional directions that (local) governments can follow to establish and reinforce sustainable, inclusive and just cities. For example, the Message suggests that cities, “capitalise on local economy and production [...] promote social innovation supporting inclusion, [...] and guarantee equal access to information/digital services”.

Examples such London's Green New Deal Fund and Portland's Clean Energy Community Benefits Fund demonstrate that following these principles can be impactful! Those initiatives aim to not only create jobs, but also to do so whilst addressing and taking action to mitigate existing inequalities, and fostering racial and social equity.