



**GRASSROOTS
GLOBAL JUSTICE
ALLIANCE**



From Crisis to Transformation:



What is Just Transition?
a primer

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We offer this primer as a contribution to the broader ecosystem of just transition frameworks and articulations. In particular, we honor the work of the Just Transition Alliance, the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Climate Justice Alliance, Movement Generation, the Labor Network for Sustainability, Trade Unions for Energy Democracy among many others. Please see page 49 for resources (in English) on just transition from many of these formations.

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Introduction

We are living through an age of profound transition. Political upheaval is the order of the day. Economic inequality is rising. People around the globe are being displaced by conflict and climate emergencies. Racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance are on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic cast new light on the injustices and irrationality of our current economic and social systems.

The crises we face today are social and political, but they go deeper. The life giving systems of the earth are under threat as a result of the system of production which has been foisted upon the world over the last 250 years. Fuelled by petrochemicals, driven by profit, and based on the hyper-exploitation of both workers and natural systems, this mode of production has overtaxed and disrupted many of the cycles that kept the global ecosystem in balance — including carbon cycles.

The changes to this cycle manifest themselves in extreme climate events, from extreme droughts and massive forest fires to more frequent and severe hurricanes and typhoons. Life itself is also being depleted. We are in the midst of our planet's *sixth mass extinction* event: an estimated 200 to 2000 species are being lost every year because of climate change, pollution and habitat destruction.

The environmental and social effects of the industrial capitalist system have long been obvious to marginalised communities forced to live in the garbage dumps of production while their resources are pillaged for raw materials. Today, however, the systemic effects are increasingly visible to all. In order to save humanity and complex life on our precious planet, we need a major course change. We need a Just Transition.

In simple terms, a Just Transition is a systemic turn, through genuinely democratic means, away from exploitation, extraction, and alienation, and towards 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. It would rely on socio-economic systems and practices that emphasise solidarity, co-operation, commoning, sharing and caring. It would shun competition, conflict, privatization, accumulation, and hyper-individualism.

This primer seeks to explore why it is imperative to orient ourselves and our social movements towards a Just Transition and how we can consciously and deliberately move away from the dysfunctional and destructive systems that are leading us towards extinction. How can we advance towards new systems of social relations that will help us to survive and overcome the climate crisis and to reverse the planet's sixth mass extinction?

This Primer has been the product of a collective process of thinking between the authors and their organisations, who have been working in different ways on the concept of Just Transition with social movements, organisations and communities around the world, and trying to understand how this simple but powerful idea can help people to mobilise for genuine and transformative change. This is not a final or exhaustive vision of Just Transition, as different regions, communities, movements and organisations are developing their own visions (see the final section). However it is hoped that these key ideas and questions will give all readers tools for thinking more deeply about what Just Transition might mean for them, their movements, and their communities.



How did we get here?

What are the historical and economic causes of the climate crisis?

Massive increases of carbon dioxide – and other “greenhouse gasses” - in the atmosphere are throwing the life-giving and self-regulating systems of the planet out of balance. The intensification of certain human activities that has disrupted the global ecosystem was not inevitable, and it is relatively recent. Carbon emissions skyrocketed with the advent of the industrial revolution in the mid-1700's. The industrial revolution was a transformation in the way we produce the goods we need to feed and otherwise sustain ourselves. It was a massive overhaul of our society's answers to the questions “Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it?”¹ The industrial revolution emerged in an area of Europe already shaped by a relatively novel social and economic organisation known as capitalism. Although industrialisation and capitalism are not identical, you cannot understand the industrial revolution without understanding capitalism.

Capitalism is a system of social organisation, which shapes people's relationships to one-another as well as to the ecosystems, territories, and other living creatures around them. It is dramatically different from the systems that went before it,² and from those — including Indigenous societies — that continue to exist in opposition or resistance to it today. A lot of people have tried to understand and describe capitalism, and because of its complexity there can be disagreements about what is fundamental to it, and what could be changed before it would be a new system altogether. As the authors see it, though, some critical features of capitalism are:

- 1 The private ownership of the means of production:** The tools, materials, or natural products needed to produce things that people need or want are owned and controlled by individuals;

- 2 **The importance of 'commodity production':** Most people don't use most of what they produce, and don't produce most of what they use. Instead, most things are produced to be sold and people have to buy most of the things that they need to survive from day to day;
- 3 **Wage labour:** Because most people do not own the means of production, they must sell their labour to those who do, in order to be able to buy the things they need to survive. Often, the work people are paid for is understood as "real work" while the work of caring for the home, children, elders, sick people, and the environment is often under-valued, made invisible, and performed without pay. It is also usually delegated to women. This work, called "reproductive labour" must be done in order for people to survive. When this work is made invisible and under-valued, it functions as a kind of "subsidy" to employers;
- 4 **Continual growth and production to maximise profit (rather than meeting human needs):** Capitalist markets put companies in constant competition with each other, so that companies need to constantly increase their profits. Under this system, they need to grow, or go out of business. This puts capitalist societies in a continual conflict with natural systems, and life on a finite and bounded planet;
- 5 **'Natural Resources':** Forests, lakes, rivers, land, rocks, animals, ecosystems and other natural processes and systems are seen as commodities or (potential) inputs into production processes. Their own existence, their dignity and their life-sustaining roles are seen as secondary to their ability to yield profit. This reductionistic understanding of mother earth is not unique to capitalism – some alternatives have fallen into the same trap - but it is very important to it;
- 6 **'Accumulation by dispossession':** In order to maximise profits, anything which can be taken for free will be. Historically shared or common lands, ecosystems, collective and Indigenous knowledge, and traditional seeds, among other things, are stolen outright or hyper-exploited, often with support from the state and legal systems, to allow companies to realise 'super profits';

7 Expansion/imperialism: Because capitalism is structured around the need to continually grow profits, it is always seeking new inputs and new markets. In alliance with white-supremacist and patriarchal states, this has driven a process of imperialist expansion, colonialism, plunder and super-exploitation across the world.

This socio-economic system set the stage for the industrialisation process, a process that super-charged capitalism and helped to spread it around the world. Industrialisation as we know it depended (and *still depends*) on fossil fuels: new fuels including coal, oil, and gas were used to drive large-scale machinery that produced mass consumer goods at scale.³ This led to huge increases in the production of goods, exploitation of the workers who produced them, and plunder of natural systems and processes — especially in the colonised world — for raw materials and forced labour. The scale of manufacturing has continued to grow with few checks, despite the heavy burden placed on natural systems by the extraction of resources and the dumping of waste.

The shift to industrial capitalist production required the complete reorganisation of society, initially in Europe, and subsequently wherever capitalism spread. The 'enclosure' of communal lands played a key role: people were driven off their land, both to free it for more profitable uses (described as 'productive'), and to create a cheap labour force. This process of 'accumulation by dispossession'⁴ was visible, violent, and widely resisted at the birth of capitalism.

Enclosures have been accompanied and underpinned by an ideology that understands nature as passive stuff that needs to be mastered or a collection of resources waiting to be used by humans. This ideology, sometimes justified with references to Christian theology, has strengthened the idea of human dominion over the Earth and legitimated the subjugation (and sometimes extermination) of Indigenous and traditional communities that live in different relationships with the Earth. It has fuelled an approach *described as 'extractivism'* – the rapacious and violent consumption of natural resources without consideration for the ecological and social worlds in which they are embedded. In many *parts of the world* overt land-, ocean- and resource-grabbing, and the associated *extractivism and destruction*, continue today. Today new types of things (Indigenous knowledge,

ideas, genes, stored carbon) are being turned into private property and stripped of their deeper cultural and social meanings.

From the mid-1700s onwards, advances in manipulating coal, kerosene, and eventually oil and gas made huge new energy reserves available for human use. These hydro-carbon fuels are high-density sources of energy, which can be easily transported and stored. These characteristics, together with new understandings of private property, created the perfect conditions for a relatively small number of people to capture and centralise wealth.

'Fossil Capitalism' has re-shaped not only the way that our society uses and distributes energy, but also the way that it uses and distributes power. Based on these historical dynamics, it has been argued that we now live in the Capitalocene Era — a geological era where capital and capitalism have a decisive influence on the earth.⁵

What are the connections between the climate crisis, inequality, and colonialism?

The transition towards fossil fuels and away from bioenergy sources (wood and human or animal energy) was a gradual, uneven and unequal process. It did not take place simultaneously in all places. The process of industrialisation started in England in the mid-1700s, then quickly spread to the cities of Western Europe and the eastern seaboard of North America in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The owning classes of Western Europe and their North American colonies, supported by the military, religious and political powers of their countries, used their new coal-fuelled economic and military power to impose a global reorganisation of labour, production, resource extraction, wealth distribution, and social and economic power throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Industrialising countries and regions pushed other regions, many of which they controlled as colonies, into providing raw materials and people, and buying their manufactured goods. In this way global flows of commodities began to emerge. Natural resources (and enslaved human beings) were extracted especially from the countries now called the global South, and transferred to the global North to further enrich wealthy people there. Cheap food (sugar from slave-plantations in the Caribbean, wheat from the settler-states of North America) and raw materials (wood from the clear-cutting of

North America; raw cotton from the colonial empire of India) helped to drive down the cost of living in urban centres of the global North. This allowed factory owners to pay the lowest possible wages to their workers, while securing maximum profits.

The global process of dispossessing people — especially racialised and Indigenous peoples and women — of the land, territories, and ecosystems with which they had previously sustained themselves, guaranteed a steady supply of labourers to cheaply extract raw materials, while also creating consumers who had to depend on markets for survival. Patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies, together with ideas of the so-called invisible hand of the market and the primacy of private property, provided an ideological justification for this plunder. The distribution of wealth and power globally today is a result of this historical injustice and violence.

However, the inequalities produced by industrial capitalism are not just between the global North and the global South. They also exist within every nation on earth. Within a given country, urban centers often grow rich by extracting resources from (and dumping waste in) rural areas. And, in both cities and the countryside, the workers on whom



Photo credit: Nadir Bouhmouch

the system depends receive a tiny share of the profits produced by their labour. Those who own the resources — financial, mechanical, natural, and other types — are able to take a far greater share. Workers frequently work in dangerous environments where measures to protect their health and well-being are lacking. From the Rana Plaza disaster of 2013 to the massive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on precarious and poorly-paid workers in slaughterhouses, warehouses, industrial farms, grocery stores, and care homes, profits are often maximised by shifting risk and cost onto workers.

This system has also deepened, created, or exploited divisions along a variety of other lines including race, gender, sex, and ethnicity. The degree to which people are able to benefit from the system of industrial production, or are expected instead to carry its costs, depends on their position in society, and the different kinds of power they are able to exercise. The process of exploiting difference and diversity, and intensifying inequality, can occur at every scale — from the individual household to the entire globe.

The environmental costs of production and extraction, including toxic emissions, environmental destruction, as well as water and air pollution are concentrated in the places where marginalised people live and work. These include especially racialised peoples and Indigenous nations, who have historically been afforded fewer rights and less social power to resist the impositions of environmental racism.

The system of industrial capitalism also depends on a huge body of often unpaid and unrecognised work which we may call 'reproductive labour'. This includes child and elder care, food production and preparation, medical care, emotional labour and environmental protection. Workers are also human beings, who must be nourished and cared for throughout their lives. Without this work, capitalism could not function.⁶ At the same time its significance is usually not acknowledged or rewarded. In the patriarchal societies of the modern world system, this work is usually assigned to women and/or gender non-conforming people. Society, customs, and laws may enforce strict gender boundaries and hierarchies, effectively appropriating women's bodies to ensure that this indispensable work continues to be minimally compensated and, ideally, goes unnoticed.

In addition to relying on the super-exploitation of women and other marginalised people, the modern capitalist system relies on easy and cheap access to natural

systems and processes. Sometimes these so-called resources are accessed for free, as when manufacturers are allowed to pump groundwater or dump waste without payment. At other times, investors treat these systems and processes as commodities, paying a nominal price for them (for example by *buying up vast tracts of land* to produce agrofuels) but ignoring the diverse roles they play in sustaining human and non-human life processes. Investors are able to gain 'super profits' by destroying the systems upon which humans and other beings depend for survival, and exploiting the people who depend on such systems.

At the same time, these social and economic systems, aimed at maximising profits, fail to meet the needs of most people and of the planet. The industrial food system relies on cheap or subsidised raw materials, which are heavily processed and transported long distances, with corporations profiting and exploiting human labour at each stage. This has come at a heavy cost to both humanity and the life-giving systems of our planet. The limited diversity of foods being consumed is leading to chronic health problems, with particular impact on poorer consumers, as fresh, healthy, locally-produced food becomes a luxury product.

According to the FAO, healthy diets are out of reach for 3 billion people. At the same time, farmers and food producers in both the North and the South are going hungry, *losing their land*, and suffering '*deaths of despair*'. This is a stark contrast to Indigenous and peasant food systems which promote food sovereignty and aim to feed communities in harmony with natural systems and territories. Through the narrow lens of capitalist evaluation, peasant food systems are often painted as backwards, small and inefficient because they do not prioritise the production of profit. From the perspective of human beings and all terrestrial life, they offer the possibility of a life-giving future.

In our energy system, overproduction and waste makes it possible for some people to consume *more energy* (directly, or in the form of manufactured products) than ever before. Yet, even in rich countries, *millions of people struggle* to heat their homes safely and adequately, or access the energy they need to live decent lives. Be it from advertising and built in obsolescence, or the opening up of new global markets and the easy availability of consumer credit for luxury purchases in the global North, the current world system is geared towards increasing consumption

and generating new needs, rather than producing well-being and satisfying everyone's existing needs.

As a direct result of the logic of capitalism we are following a development path with no future. Each year we are extracting more than the planet's ecosystems can replenish, and dumping more waste than they can endure. The governments and corporations of the world, as laid out at the COP26, plan to continue overshooting the planet's limits to protect business as usual. They pin humanity's hopes on unproven technologies to remove carbon from the atmosphere in the future.⁷ The impacts of this course are becoming harder to ignore with new climate disasters emerging daily. The benefits of all this extraction are reaped by few, while the costs are born by many. A Just Transition means reversing this dynamic.



Photo credit: Cooperation Jackson 2022



Where do we stand today?

These dynamics became much more intense during the latter half of the 20th century. After the end of the Cold War, international discussions of wealth and trade were primarily shaped by neoliberal ideology, which argues that markets function better without state intervention. Neoliberalism sees the state mainly as a defender of private property rights, and argues that governments should remove social, environmental, and economic regulations, which are said to slow economic growth and hinder the market.

Periodic natural, political, and economic crises have made many people aware of the fundamental inequalities in the system, and generated widespread calls for transformation. The COVID-19 crisis is the latest such upheaval, seeming to represent an opportunity to, as US President Joe Biden put it, 'build back better'. However, previous crises have shown the resilience of the capitalist world system. Corporations and wealthy people are best positioned to survive, or even *profit from*, these crises. During the pandemic, for example, *global inequality increased* sharply, with wealth in the hands of billionaires rising from around \$8 trillion to over \$13 trillion in a single year, with this phenomenal wealth shared by just 2,775 people.

Government reactions often reinforce this tendency, as in the food and economic crisis of 2008 when massive public bail-outs enriched a small number of private actors. The early months of the COVID-19 pandemic sparked major new social conversations about the role of the state and in some countries also triggered unprecedented levels of state investment in meeting the basic needs of citizens. However, few policies have attempted to tackle the root causes of the inequality that made so many people more vulnerable to COVID-19. Instead, action has largely tried to prop up corporate profits and ensure the continuation of the status quo, with billionaires successfully *capturing huge subsidies*. Even relatively anaemic proposals

— like a temporary suspension of certain kinds of patent enforcement in order to allow poorer countries to manufacture life-saving vaccines affordably — *have been consistently blocked* by rich countries and corporate actors.

International processes to tackle climate change — most notably the UN Climate Change Conferences — have shown the same lack of ambition, with binding targets replaced by corporate-friendly tools like carbon trading, 'nature based solutions' and 'net zero' pledges that offer *new opportunities to profit* without really addressing the crisis.

How are fossil fuels used today?

Despite clear and irrefutable evidence that the continued use of fossil fuels is rapidly transforming the climate and destroying the earth's life sustaining ecosystems, we are extracting and using more today than at any time in human history. Half of all human-caused emissions have been put into the atmosphere *since 1990*, and emissions *continue to grow* every year despite the introduction of renewable technologies. *Around three-quarters* of all greenhouse gas emissions today come from energy production, mainly through the burning of fossil fuels.

What is all this energy being used for? *Most energy today* is used for electricity, heat production, resource extraction (like mining), industrial production and transportation. The *astronomical growth of energy use* in the 20th century has been linked to an increase in material consumption (especially in the global North) and a related increase in international trade. Many people have vastly more stuff, which has travelled much farther to reach them. Raw materials, finished products and waste criss-cross the globe.

We rely on fossil fuels to produce our food, to transport people and goods around the planet (both long and short distances), to build our homes, and to care for ourselves. Alternative systems from *peasant food webs, to co-operatives and local small-scale industries* have been undermined and dismantled over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. Locally-based renewable energy, to power homes or local businesses without fossil fuels, remains extremely small-scale. In many places public and democratically controlled energy systems, which could *help re-focus*

energy production around human and environmental needs, are under threat despite widespread efforts *to resist and rollback privatization*. While wind and solar technologies accounted for a record-breaking *10% of global electricity generation in 2021*, this represents a smaller percentage of total energy use because of things like ships, airplanes and cars. Furthermore, much new renewable generation capacity is *not democratically controlled, regenerative, or socially just*.

Fossil fuels have helped to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few, to control workers, and to shuttle goods around the globe so that they can be produced wherever labour is cheapest — that is, wherever workers have the least power to demand dignity, rights, and decent treatment.⁸ Transforming our energy system is deeply related to struggles for control of territories, tools, and the means to live decent lives.

What are the impacts of different fuel sources?

Today, *more than 80%* of the world's energy still comes from fossil fuels. While demand for oil and coal dropped during the 2020 pandemic, it *has since rebounded* rapidly. All other sources, including agrofuels (fuels derived from crops like corn, oilseeds, and sugar cane), nuclear energy, hydropower, and other so-called renewable sources provide less than 20 per cent of our energy. While these sources are rapidly expanding, the amount of coal and oil used *continues to increase* year over year, with the growth in 'renewables' failing to keep pace with the growth of energy use globally.

Replacing fossil fuels with supposedly renewable energy technologies will not, on its own, get us where we need to go. While potentially healthier for the carbon cycle, many of these technologies bring heavy costs to ecosystems and communities, and *rely on other forms of extraction*, for example of *rare-earth minerals and lithium*. Agrofuel production can cause *significant emissions*, even *higher than gasoline* in some cases. Where forests, natural range-land, or other natural ecosystems are converted to industrial agricultural production to produce agrofuels the effects can be especially extreme. In 2012 the US, the world's largest producer, committed some 28 million acres of agricultural land to agrofuel production,⁹ and the scale of this production is only likely to increase.

The harmful impact of fossil fuels is beyond doubt. However, every source of energy we know of today comes with social and environmental harms. Instead of focusing only on replacing one particularly harmful type of fuel with other less harmful types, we must ask: energy for what, and for whom? To do that, it is important to first understand who benefits from the situation today.

Who is benefiting most from the continued use of fossil fuels today?

Today the *United States*, the European Union, and China are the largest emitters of greenhouse gasses and *collectively contribute 41.5%* of the global total.¹⁰ The G8 countries are considered *responsible for 86%* of 'excess' emissions. Most countries in the global South have far lower emissions. The world's richer countries are also responsible for greenhouse gasses that are emitted elsewhere in order to produce the stuff that they consume. Globally, there is a huge flow of goods, from cheap agricultural commodities to manufactured electronics and other consumables, from poor countries to rich ones. Emissions are usually counted in the country where they take place, while consumers in other countries benefit from them, meaning that international emissions figures usually undercount the contribution made by richer countries to climate change.

At the same time, not all people within a given country benefit equally from the fossil-fuel driven economy. As argued above, fossil fuels and the imperialist capitalist system built around them have allowed huge new concentrations of wealth. Specific companies and shareholders have benefited — and continue to benefit from — this model. Since 1990 the four largest fossil fuel companies (BP, Shell, Chevron, and Exxon) have amassed *nearly \$2 trillion in profits*. These companies *continue to invest* in new oil and gas exploration even as the International Energy Agency *calls for an end* to such exploration. Instead of stopping fossil fuel development, thanks to *ongoing lobbying* from these companies, international climate policy is increasingly reliant on the hope that we will somehow be able to re-absorb these emissions from the atmosphere in the future.¹¹ At the same time, other companies, from *manufacturers of industrial agriculture technologies* to *military suppliers and border security firms*, are blocking change and *preparing to benefit* from the

climate crisis. But the workers in these companies, and the communities in which their waste is dumped and from which resources are extracted, do not benefit from the huge profits that accrue to shareholders and *asset-management companies*.

Today, rich countries, and rich people within them, benefit disproportionately from the use of fossil fuels. Their power and privilege also means that they are less likely to pay the full costs of climate inaction. Despite growing awareness of the climate crisis and escalating calls for real, transformative action, those who benefit most from the status quo still use their considerable power to defend it.

How are the world's systems destabilising?

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, these long-term trends have reached a crisis point. After the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, global politics came to be dominated by the United States, and the associated ideology of 'neoliberalism'. Neoliberalism favours the free-market above all, and as it came to dominate institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) they encouraged (or forced) countries to strip back regulation on corporations (or avoid putting this in place to begin with), gut existing social programmes (or forego developing such programmes in the first place) — all based on the false belief that benefits given to corporations would trickle down to help ordinary people.

This situation appeared momentarily stable and commentators went as far as to declare 'the end of history,' suggesting that there was no more space for fundamental debate about how the societies and economies of the world should be organised. In the famous words of Margaret Thatcher 'there is no alternative [to capitalism]'. However, in the last thirty years four major types of instability have appeared or deepened. These create the possibility of dramatic change at the global level, but whether this change will be for better or for worse remains an open question.

1 Power relations between states are in flux

Since the 1990s the United States' preeminent position in the global order has been seriously called into question. Other world powers have emerged and the

balance of power is being re-negotiated. China has been especially significant, and many see its 'Belt and Road Initiative' — a large-scale global infrastructure and development project announced in 2013 — as a project to build infrastructural, economic, and cultural power and influence at the global level.

The so-called '*BRICS*' countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — have also gained power and this group has emerged as an important bloc with mutual trading relationships, strong economies, and some 40 per cent of the world's population. Many observers believe that a new multi-polar world system is developing, with economic and political power shared between multiple countries. This can lead to rapid and sometimes unpredictable shifts of power. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia is a critical illustration of this instability, and a possible milestone in the transition towards a new distribution of global power.

2 The power balance between corporations and states is in flux

Since the end of the cold war, there has been an important shift in the power of corporations. During the 20th century, especially in North America and Western Europe, the mobilisation of workers' movements resulted in a kind of compromise between labour and capital. Many states put in place relatively strong laws and regulations to control corporations, protect citizens and workers, and guarantee a basic level of access to essential goods and services (water, education, health, land, and food).

The rise of neoliberalism — driven partially by the oil crisis of the 1970s and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 — slowly stripped power from workers who had managed to gain rights, and dismantled rules that controlled corporations. In countries in the Global South such changes, along with privatisation of state utilities and public services, were often compelled through the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. This shift in power hindered the development of policies to defend people's rights and limit corporate power in the many countries where they had not yet been established. A raft of international trade and investment agreements allowed corporations to grow ever larger and more powerful, protecting corporate profits and

forcing states to limit their own powers. Most such trade agreements include investment protection clauses with 'Investor State Dispute Settlement' mechanisms, which *allow corporations to sue* states for compensation when they believe that new environmental or other *regulations in the public interest* have *negatively affected their profits*.

The increased power of companies has allowed transnational corporations to grow until their annual revenues *dwarf the economies* of mid-sized countries. These companies usually pay little or no tax, further eroding the power of underfunded states that struggle to provide basic services. This has led to social unrest around the world as social movements resist corporate power. Meanwhile the massive de-regulation of the financial sector helped to cause the 2008 global financial crisis. Corporate bail-outs and austerity measures imposed in response were the final nail in the coffin of the welfare state in many of those countries that had managed to establish some kind of comprehensive social protection.

For its part, the COVID-19 pandemic struck medical and public health systems around the world that were already gutted by austerity and privatisation. The costs of those decisions have become strikingly clear. Emergency responses to the pandemic have seen waves of public spending in some countries that would have been almost unimaginable months before. However, much of this spending has been modelled around wartime economies and many emergency relief efforts have allowed money to flow directly into the pockets of corporations, as has been clear with *vaccine production* and the resulting unequal distribution. These decisions repeated the disastrous mistakes of the 2008 bailouts which saw some of the largest transfers of wealth *from the poor to the rich* in recent history. The energy crisis which began in 2021 and was further exacerbated by the economic effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine also illustrated the continuing focus on austerity, forcing the poorest people in society to *subsidise the profits of corporations*.

Tackling the climate crisis will require large-scale co-ordinated action, and states can have a critical role to play here. But for them to take this role we will need to reverse and roll-back decades of neoliberalism. People around the world are fighting to do just that.

3 International financial markets are increasingly volatile

The 2008 global financial crisis demonstrated how much power corporations have gained relative to states. At the same time, it ushered in an era of financial instability from which the global economy has still not recovered. Commodity prices have remained both high and volatile since the crisis, and skepticism about financial markets has ushered in a massive resource rush, with corporations racing to invest in assets like land (including both agricultural land and housing), water, and minerals which are seen as relatively stable investments. Since 2008 the threat of a new recession has always seemed just around the corner, growing even more immanent with rapid inflation and market instability in 2022. The vision of continual, peaceful, global development that prompted political scientist Francis Fukuyama to declare 'the end of history' in 1992 has lost whatever credibility it once held.

The cataclysmic stock-market crashes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrate this instability. The skyrocketing popularity of cryptocurrencies and new fictitious commodities like non-fungible tokens (NFTs), the frenzied rates of inflation seen in many countries in 2021 and 2022, the wild fluctuation of oil prices and global stock markets and the ever-increasing process of 'financialisation' all suggest a deeply unstable system. Given that most people depend on markets for their daily necessities, their volatility and unpredictability are cause for deep concern.

4 The world's ecologies are destabilising

Although scientists began sounding the alarm about global climate change in the 1970s, the climate crisis rose to prominence in the 21st Century. In the face of scientific consensus and an ever-growing catalogue of extreme weather events, *virtually all governments* now admit that the global climate crisis, and associated biodiversity crisis, are urgent threats. The COVID-19 crisis has further highlighted the risks associated with destabilised global ecosystems and people's increasing dependency on fragile long-distance "supply chains".

We have therefore arrived at a moment of transition. Dramatic political, social, economic, and ecological change at a global scale appears inevitable. The socio-ecological crisis of the pandemic has thrown into stark relief the extent to which the global systems that we use to feed ourselves and meet our basic needs are not up to that task, and are instead undermining the conditions for our survival on this planet. At the same time, the obvious precarity of our situation, massive movements highlighting corruption and urgent social issues, the mounting evidence of climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have all sparked different groups of actors to propose different visions of what kind of change should occur.

How are governments, corporations, and people's movements responding to instability?

A variety of responses have emerged to these combined and converging dimensions of the crisis. We can identify three major trends:

1 Authoritarianism & Strong Man governments

In many places, populist and strong man governments, which are often misogynistic and racist or xenophobic, have gained power. They address a chaotic situation by restricting democratic possibilities and strengthening police, military and other forces of security and repression. In some cases, these actors actively deny the reality of the climate crisis, in others they argue that a strong government is needed to defend citizens while markets and corporations respond and adapt to the changing natural situation. In some cases, they endorse limited measures like carbon pricing to help markets to make this adjustment, but more often they avoid concrete commitments of this kind.

Climate responses are also increasingly framed in security and military terms: leaders argue implicitly or explicitly that high walls and strong borders will be needed to keep their countries from supposedly being overrun by waves of climate refugees. Recent decades have seen *a massive increase* in military, border, and security spending around the world. From the US' *'border wall'* to the *billions of euros* invested in a militarised and deadly border regime in Europe; from the

criminalisation of migrant solidarity to the increasing *capacity for surveillance*, many governments around the world have extended their powers to monitor, control, and punish. In some places the climate crisis is used as a pretext to deepen racist visions and policies, advocating for white-supremacist and eco-fascist 'lifeboat ethics' where racialised people are left to drown, both literally and metaphorically. States and corporations alike are pushing for *militarised responses* that treat the global crisis of earth's life-giving systems primarily as a *threat to national security*, all while ignoring the increasingly urgent appeals of bodies like the International Panel of Experts on Climate Change (IPCC) and refusing to abide by international climate agreements.

2 'Green Capitalism': Neoliberal & Keynesian

At the same time, another group of actors has actively moved to frame corporations as part of the solution to the global climate crisis. These actors generally are still operating in a neoliberal framework: they see free trade and the protection of investment as a critical responsibility of states. However, there are different shades within this perspective. Some advocates support the work of international institutions like the UN, espouse the Sustainable Development Goals, and see a role for the state in humanising capitalism, by mitigating the worst negative effects of the trade and investment regime, incentivising 'green growth', and helping citizens to make positive choices. Others view corporations as the most significant actors in a global response to climate change and believe that corporate social responsibility and the self-regulation of enlightened corporations will be enough to prevent environmental destruction and human rights violations.

This 'green capitalist' perspective has given rise to the 'financialisation of nature' — a push to 'save nature by selling it' — turning ecosystems and territories into possible vehicles for investment based on their ability to absorb carbon dioxide, protect biodiversity, or otherwise help to repair environmental damage. While corporations have played a leading role in developing these perspectives, they are often supported by huge international conservation NGOs, generally based in Northern countries. (See the Box for a few key sources on false solutions to the climate crisis).

False Solutions to the Climate Crisis: further reading

- *TNI (2016) Blue Carbon: Ocean grabbing in disguise?* <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/blue-carbon-ocean-grabbing-in-disguise>
- *Friends of the Earth International (2020) Not Zero: How 'net zero' targets disguise climate inaction* <https://www.foei.org/publication/not-zero-climate-inaction-briefing/>
- *Hoodwinked into the HotHouse (2021)* <https://climatefalsesolutions.org/>
- *Friends of the Earth International (2021) Chasing Carbon Unicorns: the deception of carbon markets and net zero* <https://www.foei.org/publication/chasing-unicorns-carbon-markets-net-zero/>
- *Friends of the Earth International (2021) Nature Based Solutions: A wolf in sheep's clothing* <https://www.foei.org/publication/nature-based-solutions-a-wolf-in-sheeps-clothing/>

In the context of the COVID pandemic many of these actors took up some traditionally progressive language, calling for 'a great reset', 'building back better', and sometimes even a 'just recovery' from the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these proposals contain some genuinely progressive elements, and could help to repair some of the worst damage caused by neoliberal capitalism, by investing in public infrastructure and providing services people need to live decent lives. In general, however, corporations are still treated as the potential saviours of mankind; the tensions between a profit motive and protecting the health and well-being of people and ecosystems are ignored; and an analysis of how to give people power over their lives, territories and livelihoods is missing.

3 Popular Movements and Just Transition

Last but not least, this unstable situation has provoked the rise of new global social movements pushing for radical and systemic change. Since the 1990s the alter-globalisation and food sovereignty movements have advanced large-scale critiques of neoliberal capitalism. In the 21st century a wide variety of movements have adopted a shared language of system change, arguing that human rights abuses, political and social harms, and the climate crisis can be addressed only by a transformation of our entire social, cultural, political, and economic system. The movements often utilise an intersectional lens, arguing that sexism and patriarchy, racism, and other forms of violence and systems of oppression are fundamental features of the capitalist system. Increasingly, these different calls are beginning to come together under the banner of Just Transition. The rest of this primer focuses on unpacking this idea.



Photo credit: MAB delegation from Amazon, 2022. Igor Meirelles, MAB



What is Just Transition?

Where did the concept come from?

The phrase, Just Transition, can be traced back to allied labour and community struggles in North America. The concept was forged by labour unions and environmental justice groups, rooted in low-income communities of colour, who saw the need to phase out industries that were harming workers, community health and the planet, while at the same time providing just pathways for workers to transition to other quality, well paying jobs.

From the outset, organisers insisted that social justice must be at the centre of a transition. Just Transition meant more than ensuring decent jobs for workers employed in harmful industries. It required acting in solidarity and alliance with fence line and frontline communities to combat environmental racism.

Tony Mazzocchi and others in the Oil Chemical Atomic Workers International Union (OCAW) *elaborated the concepts* behind Just Transition in the 1970s, and the term itself was coined in the 1990s to describe this ongoing work. As head of a union of workers responsible for toxic materials, Mazzocchi understood the impact this had on workers' health and on the environment. He initiated discussions with other movements and actors to craft social and economic policies that could lead to a Just Transition from a toxic-reliant society to a safer and less toxic one. Initially, the OCAW, environmental justice movements, and mainstream environmental organisations were unable to see eye to eye. Some anti-nuclear activists engaged in tactics such as breaking into nuclear facilities and damaging property, putting the workers' safety at risk. This caused divisions between the movements, in spite of possible shared struggles.

How did Just Transition become a key concept in transnational organising?

In the mid-1990s the OCAW reached out to environmental justice movement leaders in an attempt to build bridges between workers, the predominantly Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities living near the facilities, and the Indigenous communities whose territories were impacted by them. These leaders understood and respected unions and worker organising.

Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network, Richard Moore of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, Pam Tau Lee of Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Connie Tucker of the Southern Organizing Committee and Ruben Solis from the Southwest Workers Union began a series of meetings with Les Leopold from the Labor Institute and Joe Anderson and later Bob Wages from OCAW to find ways to jointly address the devastating impact of environmental contamination, and to explore ideas and approaches for transitioning to a more environmentally sustainable and healthy means of production. These discussions led to the founding of the Just Transition Alliance (JTA), under the leadership of Dr. Jenice View and Jose Bravo, which still continues as a powerful movement vehicle to this day.

As the concept of Just Transition was being developed in North America, global movements were facing similar challenges. Struggles against mines, dams, and other extractive projects, new forms of dispossession, worsening labour rights, and exploitative international trade gave rise to new alliances between labour, feminist, peasant, student, and environmental movements. This provoked shared discussions about alternatives to the current model under banners like 'another world is possible' and 'a world where many worlds fit'. There was a conscious effort throughout the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century to bring diverse movements together in shared spaces for discussion, and to develop common analyses and programmes of action.

These discussions eventually bore fruit. Long-standing movements for environmental justice strengthened their alliances and deepened their shared analyses, together with anti- and alter-globalisation movements. As opposition to the WTO and the neoliberal trade and investment regime mounted around the world, corporations and Northern governments seized on international climate negotiations as a space where they could advance a neoliberal corporate agenda. In response, movements developed new and stronger awareness of the relationships between the dominant trade regime and environmental destruction, and developed a stronger systemic approach, seeing economic, political, and environmental struggles as integrally linked. Building on the knowledge gained from the anti- and alter- globalisation movements, climate justice organisations and trade unions began to operate in the international climate negotiations — challenging corporations and states.

One of the most critical interventions by international trade unions was at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009, where the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) brought an explicit message of Just Transition. As it became increasingly apparent that dramatic changes would be necessary to confront climate change, unions defended the rights of workers, and emphasised the need to make sure that they did not bear the costs of transformation. This advocacy resulted in the language of Just Transition ultimately being included in the preamble to the 2015 Paris Agreement.

More recently, frontline communities have begun broadening the analysis of Just Transition beyond the needs of workers to include the rights and needs of vulnerable communities everywhere. These discussions began building a more explicit analysis of how different kinds of oppression (race, class, gender, and more) intersect with each other and are embedded in the current economic, social, and political system.

BOX 2

Developing a broader vision of Just Transition in the US

In the summer of 2013 over 30 organisations in the United States launched the Climate Justice Alliance and the Our Power Campaign — a national effort to shift the country's economic priorities away from extractive, dirty energy. This included pilot campaigns in Michigan, Mississippi, Arizona, California, Kentucky, and nearly 50 other impacted communities. The Our Power Campaign is rooted in the Just Transition strategy of directly confronting the worst manifestations of the extractive economy — including mountain top removal, toxic waste incineration, and oil refineries. At the same time, it seeks to build local alternatives and advance demands that redirect state resources toward zero waste, regional food systems, public transportation, clean community energy, efficient, affordable and durable housing, and ecosystem restoration. The Our Power Campaign is fighting to redirect resources toward local communities that want to build economies based upon interdependence and responsibility towards Mother Earth and the ecological limits of nature.

Mobilisation around climate strengthened and discussions around 'system change' became more prominent in Latin America in particular. The Peoples' Summit parallel to the Rio +20 earth summit in 2012 helped movements articulate the interconnectedness of economic and environmental destruction, and popularised an analysis based around 'real causes,' 'false solutions' and 'real solutions'. Real solutions build on power, ingenuity, and solidarity, while false solutions rest on corporate ownership and technological fixes. The participation of unions, workers organisations and communities in this critical space helped to integrate Just Transition into this framework.

Just Transition is increasingly recognised by different movements as a powerful unifying framework. Many actors think it can help to strengthen strategic alliances, and to build a better analysis of the complex power structures that are blocking transformative change in the world today.

How is Just Transition being co-opted to support business as usual?

As the phrase Just Transition has begun being used more widely, it has become a contested term and powerful actors have *tried to re-define the term* to fit their own interests. The inclusion of the term Just Transition in the *preamble of the 2015 Paris Agreement* triggered interest from many new actors. This inclusion was a result of advocacy by anti- and alter-globalisation movements together with the international labour movement and showed the increasing power and relevance of the idea. However, it also led to *a wave of new interpretations* by *companies* and governments who stand to benefit from narrowed understandings of Just Transition. Corporations and their allies have tried to advance definitions that would justify the continuation of business as usual or even a deepening of extractive activities in an exaggerated form of greenwashing.

The corporate-led transition envisioned by many of these actors stands in stark contrast with the visions of change developed by movements. Since the early 2010s, key groups within climate justice movements have been developing broader analyses of what a Just Transition really means, what systemic changes it must include, and how to advance it. As discussed above, these visions see social justice as absolutely core to the project of Just Transition and argue that the problems of the extractive and fossil-fuel based economy cannot be solved without tackling the gendered, racial and class-based forms of inequality and systemic oppression that are embedded in it.

Narrow views of Just Transition, on the other hand, are being advanced by neoliberal think tanks and social organisations, transnational corporations, and most of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments. These visions often focus on creating *'market solutions'*; developing and deploying new 'carbon neutral' technologies; *implementing technologically driven projects*

to capture atmospheric carbon and return it to the Earth (for a fee); and incentivising Indigenous peoples, workers, women, frontline communities, and nations from the global South to engage-in and promote these solutions. These views tend to focus on technological solutions implemented through market incentives, with little or no analysis of how they might affect power dynamics in a community or globally. In other words, they tend to rest on unspoken assumptions that the problems of global ecosystem break-down are largely linked to our use of the wrong technologies (especially the wrong fuel source), and that solutions can and should be implemented through the existing economic structures and systems (markets, wage labour, etc).

In these visions, social justice is seen as an 'add on' in the quest to stop the calamities of climate change. Rather than addressing the unequal power relations that drive the current world system, they concentrate on encouraging those who presently dominate the system to voluntarily adopt self-correction measures. In this logic, it is necessary to ensure that solutions are attractive to the most powerful actors in the current system, by ensuring that they can continue to profit, for example, through speculating in carbon markets, or producing 'renewable' energy on a large scale. In essence, this view of a Just Transition is one of accommodation and reform, not transformation.

Some actors go further, seeing the climate crisis and responses to it as opportunities to deepen extractivism and open up new frontiers for profit. In some cases, this is linked to deepening authoritarian tendencies, as corporations collaborate with governments and use the threat of climate chaos to impose large-scale projects on poor and marginalised peoples as part of efforts to respond to climate change. This includes large-scale so-called renewable energy projects, like hydropower dams or wind farms that displace local communities, extractive projects to provide rare-earth minerals for solar panels and windmills, reckless geo-engineering experiments, and projects that forcibly remove Indigenous peoples, forest dwellers, pastoralists, small-scale fishers and peasants from their lands and territories. Without an underlying commitment to relinquishing power to Indigenous peoples, peasants, black and afrodescendent communities, workers and impacted communities, the fear of climate chaos can be used to drive new kinds of exploitation and profiteering.

This is one of the reasons why a broad vision of Just Transition, with social justice at its core, is critical. This view centres on the need for systemic change, rather than tweaks or reforms to the existing world capitalist system. It argues that in order to have a correct relationship with mother earth and all its inhabitants, we have to transform the system from the ground up. Climate Justice Alliance (CJA), a US-based international movement, has articulated one of the clearest such visions. CJA defines a Just Transition as ‘a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste free. The transition itself must be just and equitable; redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be. Just Transition describes both where we are going and how we get there.’

We cannot get where we need to go without transforming power relations in the present world system. Capitalism is not the only system of oppression that has to be uprooted and transformed, and it does not operate in isolation from other systems of oppression. Colonialism, patriarchy, imperialism, and white supremacy must also be dismantled in order for there to be a Just Transition. While each of these systems have their own unique dynamics and methods of enforcement, they are all interconnected and interdependent upon each other.

How do we build a Just Transition?

So, if a Just Transition entails the democratic transformation of the capitalist world-system towards a regenerative world-system, built on social and environmental justice, feminism, anti-racism and the full realisation of human rights and the sanctity of mother earth, what does this transition look, taste, and feel like in actual practice? We offer eight non-negotiable programmatic ‘planks’ that we think a Just Transition MUST include, in order to bring about real transformation. However, these are not exhaustive and communities and movements around the world are continuing to elaborate core principles of Just Transitions.

Decolonisation and the restoration of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty

This calls for the nation-states of the world to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of Indigenous and traditional peoples, and to put the rights and dignity of all people at the centre of policy-making. It also calls for the freedom of colonised countries to develop and fully realise their own self-determination, sovereignty, and visions of development, free from colonial and imperialist interference, and supported by just reparations and restitutions. This includes, but is not limited to, the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty of their traditional lands. At the same time, traditional, peasant, fisherfolk, pastoralist, Black, Afro-descendent and otherwise marginalised communities who often live in close relationships to land, oceans, territories, and traditional ecosystems must also be recognised and enabled to fully participate in decisions that impact their lives, and the territories and resources on which they depend.

Indigenous peoples have also undertaken their own processes to explore Just Transition from the perspective of their ancestral knowledge and core political commitments — in North America, for example, the *Indigenous Principles of a Just Transition* were developed. Building political programmes which recognise the knowledge, rights, and political agency of Indigenous and traditional communities living in closer and more sustainable relationships with nature is critical for the restoration of ecosystems, soils, watersheds and aquifers; for revitalising biodiversity and rebalancing the carbon cycle; and for building a just society in right relationship with the Earth.

Reparations and restitution

Without social justice, an energy transition will only be a means for greening the capitalist status quo. In order to be just, a transition must heal and repair the historic damages perpetrated through the wholesale plunder of colonised territories and peoples. Colonialism, genocide, enslavement, and imperialism are crimes against humanity that must be redressed through reparations and various forms of restitution. In specific local and national contexts, additional historical damages may also need to be healed.

Some remedies might include: the restoration of Indigenous and traditional communities' sovereignty throughout the Americas; the provisioning of lands for African descendents to steward with Indigenous consent; the repatriation of stolen cultural heritage, and/or compensation for traditional knowledge appropriated for profit; a recognition of the critical contribution all workers make to society; the abolition of unjust debts imposed on colonised nations to perpetuate colonial power relationships; the end of illicit capital flows from Southern to Northern countries; the end of imbalanced and unfair trade regimes that continue to marginalise colonised countries; the transfer of financial compensation and technology to all peoples colonised, enslaved or colonially subjected to European rule, plunder, or violence; and a just valuation of and fair payment for care and reproductive work. This flow of financial resources back into the economies and segments of society from which they were plundered could help fund the necessary global transition.

Ancestral and science based solutions

How, why, and from whom we derive our solutions to the climate crisis is important. It is important that we first learn from those peoples and communities that have the longest track record of stewarding healthy, life-sustaining lands. Indigenous and traditional communities hold knowledge gained and passed on from generation to generation, drawing on thousands of years of observation and cohabitation with the beings in their environments. Traditional fishing, farming, and pastoral peoples around the world have likewise built their own ways of knowing, and rich body of knowledge about the natural world.

This knowledge must be buttressed with observations and methodologies from science, as a means for producing and calculating outcomes at a global scale. Indigenous peoples have been warning the world of the disruptions produced by capitalism for centuries now. Science has reaffirmed these warnings for more than a century. Both traditions have, for decades, called for transformative solutions. To build the kind of knowledge we need to transform the world, it is critical to bring different traditions of knowledge and wisdom into dialogue with one another. To do this, we must critically interrogate knowledge and technologies,

asking what they are for, whose interests they serve, and who benefits from their use. Scientific understanding must be developed in ways that respect, strengthen, and critically learn from Indigenous, local, and traditional knowledge around the world. This transformation of our way of knowing, known sometimes as 'epistemic justice', is critical to a Just Transition.

Agroecology, food sovereignty, and agrarian reform

Agroecology is the science of sustainable agriculture based on the life-giving, millennia-old agricultural practices to produce the protein, fibers and fruits for human consumption in harmony with local ecosystems. It is also, *in the words of the Nyeleni Forum on Agroecology* 'a key form of resistance to an economic system that puts profit before life'. Agroecology is political and justice-oriented at its core. It seeks to learn from nature, and draws on the wisdom of Indigenous cultures, traditional fishers, peasants and pastoralists, and others who have been living for centuries in close relationships with land, oceans, territories, and their non-human inhabitants. Commonly described as 'a science, a practice, and a movement', agroecology brings together different peoples from around the world to defend a way of producing food and base relationships with the land on restoration rather than extraction.

Agroecological food production will drastically reduce fossil fuel use and emissions for food production, eliminate toxic fertilisers, and help to restore diverse and flourishing ecosystems. But it is also far more than a set of tools or techniques: *'Agroecology is political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society'*. In this way, agroecology is inextricably linked to ongoing struggles for food sovereignty, and for the protection of rural territories and communities around the world. The defence of food sovereignty and agroecology in territories where they are still practiced, and the transformation of industrialised food systems where these are currently dominant, is a key pillar of a Just Transition.

Recognition of rights to land, food, ecosystems and territories

Redistributive land reform on a grand and global scale is an absolute necessity for Just Transition. Approaching land, water, forests, and oceans as commodities, or as 'resources' waiting passively to be exploited for profit, is a key cause of the crisis we find ourselves in today. Throughout history and in the practices of many Indigenous, traditional and alternative societies today, we find systems for collectively managing people's access to land, as well as other just and sustainable means of subsistence. Land does not need to be viewed as private property, where one person can do what they want. Communities, states, and groups of individuals can collectively and democratically manage resources under many different legal structures.

'*Commons*' — or collectively managed land, water, air, soil or natural patrimony which many people in a community have rights to access and use in specific ways — are one model for re-thinking our relationships with land. A Just Transition will require creative exploration of different ways to collectively and democratically manage resources, and moving beyond the model of 'absolute ownership' that has allowed supposed owners of land or other resources to exploit and destroy land with little or no accountability to the broader community. Because the present distribution of land in the world is so unjust, we must also think deeply about the principles that can guide land reform. The core principles of "recognition, restitution, redistribution, regeneration, and representation" (*the 5Rs*) are one set of principles that could shape and guide the kind of land reform that could support a Just Transition.

In the same way as the physical resources of the world must be de-commodified, collectively managed, and justly shared, the management of knowledge and genetic resources must also be transformed. Intellectual property regimes have helped to convert the intellectual heritage of all mankind and the planet's biodiversity into private property, and this privatisation must be rolled back.

Co-operatives, social and public production

One critical aim of a Just Transition is transforming labour in our society, and building opportunities for people to engage in meaningful, decent, valuable work. As the COVID-19 crisis showed, so-called essential workers are at the centre of production. Their work keeps our society functioning. And yet, they often work in dangerous, dirty, and degrading situations, with little security, and minimal control over their own work. The fundamental division between those who labour and those who profit from other people's labour must be overcome by recognising labour rights, and creating a society where all people can make use of their skills.

Worker-owned, controlled and self-managed co-operatives are one way to transform the exploitative and hierarchical relationships at the core of many workplaces today. Combined with other practices of solidarity and mutual aid — such as time banking, community land trusts, barter or swap meets, and zero-interest banking — these practices help to lay the ground-work for a new kind of economy. In some places, public ownership can also play a key role in shifting production away from profit-driven and growth-oriented systems and processes. De-privatisation and *public ownership* can be key drivers of change, for example *in energy systems* where profit-driven models are currently blocking transformation.

Today's workers must play a key role in determining how they will work in the future. Labour actions like the *unprecedented strike by workers* at General Electric, demanding that production be re-directed to supply ventilators urgently needed to treat patients during the COVID-19 pandemic, are a striking illustration of people's desire to do meaningful work for the good of their communities. Likewise the mass mobilisations of the Indian Farmers' movement show the possibilities for new alliances around decent lives and livelihoods across many different kinds of work. Just Transition must put the interests and aspirations of workers everywhere — including those working in informal, unpaid, precarious, non-unionised, or illegal situations — at the center of the struggle for meaningful work in a regenerative relationship with nature.

Just distribution of reproductive labour

Central to the struggle for meaningful and sustainable work, is a recognition of the role that often-unwaged 'reproductive' work plays in maintaining our society. From raising children to caring for elders; from feeding a hungry family to caring for a sick worker; from nurturing a garden to defending against an environmental disaster, reproductive work is critical to our survival. Yet, too often, this labour goes unrecognised, and its benefits are appropriated by employers who hyper-exploit workers, relying on free labour, often from women and gender non-conforming people, to fill the gap between the wages paid to workers and a decent living. People's creative survival strategies and techniques of 'making do' are exploited as sources of additional profit for employers. Rather than being marginalised and exploited, the work of social reproduction and care should be placed at the center of our society.

Just Transition must not be built upon the donated or expropriated work of people marginalised because of their gender or for any other reason. Thus, a Just Transition requires a profound reckoning with the way that our society distributes the tasks fundamental to reproducing our bodies, our families, our cultures, our societies, and our planet. People of every gender and sexual orientation must be afforded the ability to realise their full potential as human beings. This will be possible only when we work to overcome patriarchal and sexist structures which systematically dismiss or undervalue reproductive work, and disproportionately shift it to less powerful members of society. At the same time, it demands a re-assessment of the value of this vital work. A Just Transition requires recognising that these processes of individual, community, and planetary survival should be at the centre of our society, rather than serving as an invisible subsidy to corporate super-profits.

Beyond endless economic growth

Today we produce more than enough food and essential commodities to meet the fundamental needs of all human beings. However, these products are not evenly distributed. Many cannot afford to consume what they need to survive. Meanwhile our economic system is continually stoking new desires, increasing consumption of those who can afford it, and encouraging others to profit from the sale of commodities.

We must transform the goods we produce and the ways we produce them to democratically address genuine human needs, not the desire for profit. At a global scale, a programme of just, democratic, equitable production is almost sure to require a dramatic reduction of material consumption in the countries of the global North, especially by wealthy people within them. Here, a great deal can be achieved by developing public affluence instead of private wealth — libraries rather than bookstores, liveable cities and public parks rather than luxury getaways for the super-rich, and meaningful education for all rather than the privatisation of knowledge.

Meanwhile, those who struggle to access the means of survival — including marginalised and oppressed people in the global South and North — will be able to consume more, while also benefiting from new public goods. Production that aims to meet the needs of every human being, while maintaining respectful relationships with non-humans and ecosystems, would allow us to step away from the destructive logic which argues that economic markets must grow at all costs in the hopes that (some) human beings can benefit. This logic must be reversed, to put the needs of people and ecosystems first, and step beyond a logic which demands infinite growth on a finite planet.



How are communities putting visions of Just Transition into practice today?

Around the world, different communities are exploring and developing their own visions of Just Transition. This section highlights case studies, with a focus on North America.

Case 1:

The Green New Deal

The concept and framework of the ‘Green New Deal’ (GND) started as a radical proposal by the Green Party in the early 2000s. Activists within the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA), adopted the framing in the mid-2010s and DSA member turned New York Congresswoman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, introduced it to the political mainstream shortly after her election in 2018. The call for a Green New Deal resonated with movements advancing Just Transition strategies because, at the core, the GND asserted that truly addressing the climate crisis will require fundamentally transforming extractivism and exploitation in our economy as a whole.

The passage of the Green New Deal Resolution was a major advance, but translating this general framework into a prescription for government will require a powerful social movement that can shift the balance of power in both production and politics. The disproportionate power of the petro-chemical industry, in particular, has to be weakened or the GND will be watered down into a greenwashing tool.

To avoid this, organisations representing frontline communities, particularly those representing working class communities and the historically oppressed, must lead its development and implementation. Such organisations have already been at the forefront of discussions of the GND, providing concrete content as well as deep criticisms.

One of the key forces playing this complex role is the It Takes Roots (ITR) Alliance, an alliance representing Black, Indigenous, and people of color frontline (BIPOC) communities throughout the United States, Canada, Micronesia and Puerto Rico. Alliance members include the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA), Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ), the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), and the Right to the City Alliance (RTTC). It Takes Roots helped to build the United Frontline Table that developed the 'People's Orientation to a Regenerative Economy.' offering over 80 policy interventions at local, state, national and tribal levels. The broad program of demands in the Peoples Orientation document are presented as fifteen planks for a Regenerative Economy that a Green New Deal could provide when this kind of large scale structural reform fight is genuinely rooted in justice for workers, frontline communities and the environment. Each of the policy interventions are grouped into four overarching stances:

- 1 Protect: solutions must protect, not harm air, land, water, bodies and communities
- 2 Repair: solutions must repair the past and ongoing harms from the extractive economy
- 3 Invest: solutions must move non-extractive and equitable investments to frontline communities and workers.
- 4 Transform: solutions must provide the foundation to transform relationships and structures so they are rooted in respect, equity and justice.

The interventions by frontline grassroots movements around the Green New Deal are key, because, as discussed in this primer, many actors use the term Just Transition without having real justice in mind. Critical initiatives at the sub-national level — like Just Transition Alaska, the Oregon Green New Deal, the California Green New Deal,

an act to Establish a Green New Deal for Maine and the Gulf South for a Green New Deal Coalition across 11 Southern states — are also helping to drive and shape change. Any serious Green New Deal effort rooted in a Just Transition to a regenerative economy must be an inclusive process that's both bottom up and locally driven.

Case 2:

Cooperation Jackson and the Jackson Just Transition Plan

Jackson is a city in crisis. *As noted by the administration* of the late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba: 'Jackson, like many urban centers, is struggling to overcome decades of economic divestment, deindustrialisation, suburban flight, a declining tax base, chronic under and unemployment, poorly performing schools, and an antiquated and decaying infrastructure'. Jackson is also a city confronting numerous environmental racism challenges that constitute an ongoing health crisis and human rights violations. Jackson, sadly, is also one of the largest contributors to climate change in the state of Mississippi as a direct result of how it receives and consumes its energy as the major industries in and around the city depend on trucking, railroad, and air freight transportation.

To improve the quality of life in our city and for the sake of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren we can and must end the overlapping environmental, climatic and human rights crises confronting us. Cooperation Jackson believes that we can solve these crises by organising our communities to execute a comprehensive program that will protect our environment, curb our carbon emissions, stimulate employment, and democratically transfer wealth and equity.

We consider this comprehensive program a Just Transition program which is premised on ending systematic dependence on the hydro-carbon industry and the capitalist-driven need for endless growth on a planet with limited resources. Instead, we can create a new, democratic economy that is centred around sustainable methods of production and distribution that are more localised and co-operatively owned and controlled. Cooperation Jackson's specific contribution to a Just Transition program is our Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI), which has three primary components:

1. Green Co-operatives

We are intentional in creating a co-operative eco-system that reinforces and builds upon itself. With three co-operatives so far, we have created a reinforcing value chain: Freedom Farms produces food that is sold and consumed locally, the waste from which is utilised by The Green Team to create organic compost that returns to the farm. This is an example of the types of sustainable and regenerative enterprises and systems that we are constructing.

2. Building an EcoVillage

The Eco-Village focuses on building a sustainable live-work community in West Jackson. The Eco-Village will be situated upon and protected by a Community Land Trust (CLT) created by Cooperation Jackson and controlled by residents of West Jackson. It will provide affordable co-operative housing and jobs through a number of integrated and interdependent co-operative enterprises that will be situated within the community, including urban farms, composting operations, childcare, solar-thermal installation and maintenance, security, arts and culture, and a grocery store.

3. Just Transition Policy Reform

The broader Just Transition component of the initiative focuses on instituting policies that curb ecological destruction and climate change and incentivise the creation of sustainable jobs and co-operative enterprises in our city. We are committed to making Jackson the most sustainable city in the South, if not the country, by committing the city government to institute policies that will enable Jackson to become a Zero-Emissions and Zero-Waste city by 2030.

Case 3:

Just Transition in North Africa

North Africa's Sahara desert is usually described as a vast empty land. Alternatively, it is considered an Eldorado of renewable energy that offers Europe energy so that an extravagant consumerist lifestyle and excessive energy consumption might continue. However, these deceptive narratives overlook questions of ownership and sovereignty and mask ongoing global relations of domination that facilitate the plunder of resources, the privatisation of commons, the dispossession of communities, and exclusionary ways of governing an energy transition.

Several examples from the North African region show how energy colonialism is reproduced even in transitions to renewable energy in the form of green colonialism or green grabbing.

The Ouarzazate Solar Plant in southern Morocco, launched in 2016 has failed to bring any semblance of justice to the Amazigh agro-pastoralist communities whose lands were used, without consent, for the 3,000 hectare facility. Moreover, the project is a Public Private Partnership (PPP) financed by more than \$9 billion in borrowing from the World Bank and European Investment Bank, among others. This debt is backed by Moroccan government guarantees, which means potentially more public debt for an already over-burdened country. Since its launch in 2016, the project has been recording an annual deficit of around 80 million euros, covered from the public purse. Finally, the project is using concentrated thermal power (CSP) that necessitates extensive use of water in order to cool down the system and clean the panels. In a semi-arid region like Ouarzazate, diverting water from drinking and agriculture is profoundly unjust.

Meanwhile in Tunisia, there is a major push to privatise the renewable energy sector and give huge incentives to foreign investors to produce green energy in the country — including for export. The renewable energy law even allows for the use of agricultural land for renewable projects in a country that suffers from acute food dependency. Who does such an energy transition really serve?

All over the region, various export-oriented projects are being pushed and promoted by foreign actors, aiming to deliver low cost power to Europe. These prioritise the EU's energy security while potentially creating new sacrifice zones. Recent hype over so-called green hydrogen represents one more such frontier.

A Just Transition for North Africa would look profoundly different, with a focus on the needs of local communities, an end to relationships of dependency with Europe and other imperial powers, and a fundamental transformation of the politics of the region towards genuine democratic control over energy (and other) systems.

Case 4:

Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB)

The Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB, for its Portuguese acronym) was born as a social movement to resist the construction of large-scale hydroelectric dams in Brazil, displacing families and communities. Until the 1990s this struggle targeted state-owned enterprises and focused on individual problems. However, with the neoliberalism advancing we felt the need to reorganize ourselves as a national movement, to build a different energy model: a people's energy system in which water and energy would be controlled publicly and communally, with the goal of wealth redistribution.

We developed a critical analysis of the inequalities created by the energy model in Brazil, which had created a high concentration of wealth in the hands of the international financial system. We confronted this model with the need for an energy transition. Therefore, we started from the need to transform the whole energy system, not just the sources of energy. If we do not, as a society, discuss the energy policy that organizes and structures electricity production, renewable technologies (like hydro-electric) will not bring about a change to the unfair structures that sustain the model. In this way, even if solar and wind energy are considered clean energies, they do not automatically promise equitable access to energy, or just distribution of wealth. Thus, we focus on the main questions: Energy for what? And for whom?

The case of Brazil illustrates how an energy system based on private control, dominated by financial capital and institutions captured by and for capital, does not serve people. Energy companies in Brazil adopted a tariff system that privileged the most privileged and punished the population with absurdly high prices. While a change in energy sources is important, it is not sufficient for a Just Transition. Instead, an energy transition necessarily means overcoming the market model, profoundly transforming society and capitalism.

The second key element in our energy transition project is strengthening and developing the historical subjects who can carry it forward. Popular participation and peoples' democratic power is vital to the energy transformation. We worked on two fronts to develop this. At the Latin American level, to resist the advancing extractivism and the construction of new dams we built the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAR, from its acronym in Spanish), together with other movements. After a long process, we have an overview of the architecture of the energy system in Latin America, allowing us to build more coordinated and effective actions against large projects and companies.

In Brazil, together with workers from oil, electricity, cities, education and water sectors, we also built the Worker and Peasant Platform on Energy and Water (POCAE, for its Portuguese acronym) so we can build a collective struggle with the whole population. At the heart of this process, we are working on a peoples' energy project, testing our models of transition. In the first ten years of collective work, we have promoted several collective struggles: for energy sovereignty, against privatization, against increases and high prices, and for the just use of the wealth generated in the energy sector.

We believe that acting effectively to drive an energy transition requires us to understand and address structural, policy, and economic factors. But we also work to change energy sources directly, for example through our proposal for decentralized power generation through the installation of solar panels under the lake created by a hydroelectric plant in the Sertão Mineiro region, the Project Vereda Sol e Lares. In this project, 1200 families affected by the dam are building their own solar energy production in a cooperative way and will supply themselves with energy, which they do not have access to today. They will also be able to increase their

income by selling excess energy to the integrated network. In this way, we will not create new environmental impacts, because we will take advantage of the existing lake and distribute energy to those who need it. The expectation is to be able to replicate and stimulate community energy production, generating more autonomy for families and the movement, to continue subsidizing the struggles for systemic transformation.



Photo credit: Grassroots Global Justice



What is the future of Just Transition?

The COVID-19 pandemic and governments' initial response to it showed that collective resources can be mobilised extremely rapidly when there is political will. Yet the use of public money and state power was uneven, short-term, often undemocratic, and sometimes outright authoritarian or harmful to working people. A Just Transition will not and cannot be a top-down process. Rather, it requires different movements of different kinds of working people — in rural and urban areas, in global North and global South, in different racialised and marginalised communities, in paid, formal, informal, or unpaid work — to come together, to build the kind of future they want, and to demand their governments support their vision.

This will require an unprecedented level of co-operation, solidarity, and common struggle across many barriers. It will be a complex process, different in every place, and involving careful, nuanced work to ensure that the transition does not simply create new geographies and relationships of exploitation and marginalisation. But, in the movements around the world today, there are countless hopeful and inspiring examples of this kind of resistance and convergence. From the striking victory of the Indian Farmers' Movement in 2021 to the groundswell of solidarity and courage that saw countless ordinary people through the chaos and fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can see that the people, the skills, and the capacities to bring about change already exist within the communities and movements of working people around the world. The future of Just Transition will be built together.

Further reading and inspiration on Just Transition:

- Just Transition Alliance (1997) Principles of Just Transition <https://jtalliance.org/what-is-just-transition/>
- Indigenous Environmental Network (2017) Indigenous Principles of Just Transition <https://www.ienearth.org/justtransition/>
- Climate Justice Alliance (2017) Just Transition: A Framework for Change <https://climatejusticealliance.org/just-transition>
- Movement Generation (2017) Just Transition Zine <https://movementgeneration.org/justtransition/>
- CSA-TUCA (2018) Declaration Of The 3rd Regional Conference On Energy, Environment And Work https://csa-csi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/16_10_2018-DECLARACION-FINAL-CREAT-IN.pdf
- Groundwork (2019) Down to Zero: the politics of a Just Transition <https://groundwork.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/down-to-zero.pdf>
- Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (2019) Working Paper #11, Trade Unions and Energy Democracy <https://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/resources/tued-working-papers/tued-working-paper-11/>
- Labor Network for Sustainability, (n.d.) A Just Transition <https://www.labor4sustainability.org/post/a-just-transition>
- Asia Europe People's Forum (2020) AEPF Lahore Report: Towards a Just Transition <https://aepf.info/AEPF-Lahore>
- Transnational Institute (2020) Just Transition: How environmental justice organisations and trade unions are coming together for social and environmental transformation <https://www.tni.org/en/justtransition>
- Friends of the Earth International (2021) If it's not Feminist, it's not Just <https://www.foei.org/publication/if-its-not-feminist-its-not-just/>
- CUT Brasil (2021) Just Transition: a trade union proposal to address the climate and social crisis <https://www.cut.org.br/acao/download/3719ee96b667057b112a1fd5d12d2542>
- Transnational Institute (2022) Just Transition in North Africa <https://longreads.tni.org/just-transition-in-north-africa>

Endnotes

- 1 Bernstein, H. (2010). *Class dynamics of agrarian change*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood.
- 2 Meaksins Wood, E (1999), *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*.
- 3 Andreas Malm in *Fossil Capital* (2016) argues that parts of this reorganisation and scaling up of production were already underway before fossil fuels (using water power) but that fossil fuels massively increased the ability of factory owners to dominate workers, by allowing them to relocate manufacturing at will.
- 4 Harvey, D. (2003). *Accumulation by dispossession*. In *The new imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- 5 Moore, J. W. (2017). The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(3), 594-630.
- 6 Fraser, N. (2017). 7. Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism. In *Critical Theory in Critical Times* (pp. 141-159). Columbia University Press.
- 7 Carton, W. (2020). Carbon unicorns and fossil futures. Whose emission reduction pathways is the IPCC performing? In *Has It Come to This? The Promises and Perils of Geoengineering on the Brink*. Rutgers University Press.
- 8 See e.g. Malm, A. (2016) *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Verso; Moore, J. (2015) *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, Verso; Huber, Matt (2013) *LifeBlood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*, University of Minnesota Press; Rodney, W (1972), *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.
- 9 Huber, M. T., & McCarthy, J. (2017). Beyond the subterranean energy regime? Fuel, land use and the production of space. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(4), 655-668.
- 10 If historical emissions are factored in, the US is a clear leader, responsible for some 20 per cent of emissions since 1750.
- 11 Carton, W (2020). Carbon unicorns and fossil futures.





Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ) is a multi-racial, multi-sectoral alliance of more than 60 grassroots base building organizations building a popular movement for climate, gender & racial justice, antimilitarism, and just transition to a feminist, antiracist and regenerative economy. Our work is internationalist, intergenerational, mix gendered and rooted in the leadership of frontline Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islanders, Arab, and white working class peoples in North America.

<https://ggjalliance.org/>



The Transnational Institute (TNI) is an international research and advocacy institute committed to building a just, democratic and sustainable planet. for Nearly 50 years, TNI has served as a unique nexus between social movements, engaged scholars and policy makers.

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