

Guiding Principles for Just Transition

An integrated approach to facilitating a just energy transition to low-carbon, resource-efficient, and resilient economy

JUST TRANSITION



UNECE

Introduction

The concept of 'Just Transition' was first introduced by U.S. trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the growing recognition that environmental regulations, while essential for protecting public health and ecosystems, could also have unintended economic consequences for workers in affected industries. As governments introduced stricter policies to reduce air and water pollution, industries such as coal mining, steel production, and manufacturing faced operational changes, downsizing, or closures. These shifts threatened the job security, wages, and livelihoods of thousands of workers, particularly those in fossil fuel-dependent communities.

In response, trade unions advocated for a fair and equitable approach that addressed both environmental and economic needs. They pushed for policies that would **ensure workers and communities were not left behind in the transition to a greener economy**. This included government support for retraining programmes, financial assistance, and job creation initiatives in emerging sustainable industries.

Over time, the concept of Just Transition has evolved into a comprehensive framework that seeks to **balance environmental sustainability with social and economic justice**. It aims to ensure that workers, communities and marginalised groups are actively supported in the shift toward a low-carbon future. The Just Transition has gained growing recognition at the annual United Nations Climate Change Conferences (Conferences of the Parties, COP), where discussions and commitments have highlighted its critical role in global climate action. Notably, the [Paris Agreement preamble](#) acknowledges the need for a Just Transition, reinforcing its significance in international climate policy. Similarly, the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** has integrated the concept into its assessment reports, recognizing it as essential for equitable climate mitigation and adaptation strategies and signalling its broad scientific acceptance across disciplines.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has played a pivotal role in shaping the global Just Transition agenda. Its [2016 Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#) emphasize the importance of social dialogue at all levels among governments, employers, and workers to ensure that policy decisions are fair, inclusive, and effective. The guidelines highlight key areas including employment creation, skills development, social protection, and rights at work. They have been instrumental in helping governments and businesses develop labour-related policies and practices that align with sustainability goals while safeguarding workers' rights. In 2023, at the International Labour Conference delegates representing workers, employers, and governments from the ILO's 187 Member States adopted [conclusions concerning a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#) and called on the ILO to collaborate with international and regional organizations to advance a just transition.

At **COP 28 in Dubai**, the Parties affirmed that a "just and equitable transition", encompasses energy, socioeconomic, workforce and other dimensions. These pathways must be based on nationally defined development priorities and include social protection so as to mitigate potential impacts associated with the transition¹.

¹ COP 28 Decision -/CMA.5 United Arab Emirates Just Transition work programme <https://unfccc.int/cop28/outcomes>

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has adopted a working definition of Just Transition as an approach that seeks to ensure that the shift to a low-carbon future is fair, equitable, and inclusive - leaving no one behind. It brings together environmental sustainability with social and economic justice through an integrated set of actions aimed at advancing social progress, protecting and empowering workers, fostering environmental consciousness and responsibility, and promoting economic success. These efforts are underpinned by participatory governance and strong, accountable institutions.

A successful Just Transition should also reduce inequalities by creating decent work opportunities and addressing the specific needs of marginalized groups, including women, indigenous peoples, youth, and the elderly. Gender equality is essential: both men and women should be financially empowered, and women's perspectives should be actively considered as socioeconomic conditions evolve. A successful transition requires local, bottom-up participation from all stakeholder groups, supported by strong government commitments to financial and social security measures. Nationally defined development priorities combined with local, bottom-up participation are key to ensuring that no one is left behind. Achieving this also requires economically viable measures to ensure the long-term sustainability of the just transition.

A just transition also needs international cooperation and the provision of the means of implementation – including capacity-building, finance, and the development and transfer of technology – to enable the effective implementation of just transition strategies.

To support this goal, UNECE - through a collaborative effort involving diverse stakeholders of its [Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane and Just Transition](#) and the [Task Force on Just Transition](#) - has developed a set of **Guiding Principles** for governments, the private sector, workers, civil society, and international organizations.

Organized under six interconnected pillars and guided by three foundational principles, the Guiding Principles provide a framework for implementing a Just Energy Transition that is equitable, sustainable, and inclusive. The pillars are intended to be adopted in an integrated and holistic manner.

While the principles were developed primarily with coal phase-down in mind, they are also applicable to the broader phase-down of other fossil fuels, legacy industries and post-mining transitions.

Just Transition Pillars



Three Foundational Principles

Three foundational principles underpin the six pillars and are essential to the overall Just Transition framework.

Principle 1: Planning for and Financing the Transition

Ensure that planning processes begin well in advance of anticipated transitions to allow sufficient time for stakeholder engagement, capacity-building, closure planning, workforce reskilling, and financial model development. Planning should start early - even during the mine development phase – since preparing for closure is a strategic investment in long-term success. Effective planning also requires a clear, inclusive governance structure that enables cross-sector and multi-level coordination, ensures multistakeholder representation, and integrates accountability and grievance mechanisms to guide a coherent and equitable transition. Government guidance and regulation are critical to the success of the transition, including proactively promoting the introduction of replacement industries, developing and attracting talent for the industrial transformation, and providing or facilitating access to transition funding.

Principle 2: Just Transition is Context Specific

Ensure Just Transition strategies are grounded in national, regional, and local contexts, taking into account social, economic, political, and governance systems; resource availability; and the energy mix and energy security – both during and after the transition.

Principle 3: Measuring & Reporting Outcomes

Define clear, context-specific Just Transition outcomes with tailored success criteria. Establish methods for measuring and monitoring progress before, during, and after the transition. Ensure transparent reporting to communities and relevant stakeholders, and integrated continuous learning to support long-term sustainability.

Pillar I Social Progress



Within the Just Transition framework, social protection is a fundamental pillar that ensures the shift towards a sustainable, low-carbon economy does not leave vulnerable populations behind while safeguarding their human rights and empowering them.

Principle I.1: Social Equity

Ensure a fair distribution of the benefits and costs of transition, in line with the principles of distributive justice. Prioritise the needs of the most affected regions and vulnerable groups at greatest risk. Aim both to redress pre-existing inequalities and address the disproportionate impacts of the transition.

Principle I.2: Socio-Cultural Resilience

Foster social and cultural resilience by promoting social cohesion and cultural identity in communities affected by the transition. This includes supporting adaptive cultural practices that respect heritage while facilitating integration into new economic systems. Ensure inclusive decision-making processes that uphold cultural representation.

Principle I.3: Community Resilience and Capacity-building

Build community resilience and capacity before, during, and after the transition. Recognise that effective social safety nets should support not only individual workers but also communities that are heavily dependent on coal mining jobs and related economic benefits.

Principle I.4: Restorative Justice

Recognise and address historical harms caused by extractive industries through inclusive, community-driven processes that restore social cohesion, rebuild trust, and support long-term healing. This includes the rehabilitation of land, redress for affected communities, and recognition of the cultural and environmental damage caused by past activities. A just transition should acknowledge historical injustices and contribute to repairing the social and ecological fabric harmed by traditional mining and fossil fuel practices.

Pillar II Workers' Protection and Empowerment



A Just Transition protects workers from economic displacement, safeguarding their rights, livelihoods, and well-being. Protecting and empowering workers is fundamental to guaranteeing that the transition to a green economy does not come at the expense of the workforce in legacy industries and their surrounding ecosystems. Effective mechanisms for workers' representation, retraining, job placement support, and social security in cases of unemployment should be established and function effectively to facilitate a fair transition.

Principle II.1: Tripartite Approach

Foster meaningful engagement between governments, workers' representatives, and employers to uphold workers' rights. This includes establishing binding agreements, ensuring job security, and facilitating effective reskilling throughout the transition process.

Principle II.2: Cross-Sectoral Support

Adopt an integrated approach that considers transition impacts across multiple sectors, extending beyond the coal sector to include manufacturing, process and services industries, while aligning with broader regional and industrial development strategies.

Principle II.3: Comprehensive Worker Support

Implement timely, comprehensive support mechanisms for workers and their families directly or indirectly affected by the transition. This includes severance payments, retraining, employment services, upholding labour standards through fair wages to prevent exploitation of workers who might accept substandard wages due to limited job opportunities, and social safety nets. Pay particular attention to the inclusion and support of informal, gig-economy and migrant workers. Ensure that these measures offer dignified, culturally appropriate pathways to new livelihoods and include workers from both the formal and informal sectors.

Principle II.4: Employment Reorientation towards Emerging Economic Sectors

Ensure workers have access to career services and skill development programmes aligned with labour market trends, facilitating transitions to green economy jobs wherever possible. Address geographic mismatches between labour supply and demand through relocation support, while extending social support to affected families and communities. Additionally, engage and empower youth to pursue local employment opportunities by equipping them with the skills and resources needed to succeed in the workforce of the future.

Pillar III Environmental Consciousness & Responsibility



A Just Transition ensures that environmental conservation and climate action are aligned with socio-economic justice and human rights, with an emphasis on the rights of communities historically impacted by environmental degradation.

Principle III.1: Environmental Accountability

The environmental costs should be borne by the polluters, not by workers or affected communities. Accountability must extend across the entire lifecycle of operations, including prevention of environmental harm, mitigation of ongoing impacts, and full remediation and restoration after mine closure.

Principle III.2: Strengthening Environmental Resilience in Post-Mining Area Planning

Support environmental resilience by integrating climate risk considerations into future planning for post-mining areas. Ensure alignment with regional adaptation priorities and economic diversification goals to ensure sustainable and equitable outcomes. Incorporate principles of restorative justice by addressing historical environmental degradation, prioritising land rehabilitation, and ensuring that affected communities benefit from ecological recovery efforts.

Principle III.3: Repurposing for Green Economic Development

Pursue opportunities to repurpose mine infrastructure or land for environmental or green economy purposes, such as renewable energy projects and natural areas.

Pillar IV Economic Success



Fostering economic resilience and equity through the transition is essential for a sustainable future. Fair labour practices, long-term economic viability and diversification, inclusive financial systems, and targeted investments ensure a just transition and prevent economic disparities.

Principle IV.1: Economic Regeneration

Incentivise entrepreneurship and business development in transition-affected areas, aligning local economic development with regional strengths and opportunities and ensuring the inclusion of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

Principle IV.2: Economic Diversification

Support and invest in the diversification of economies affected by the transition, strengthening their long-term viability and resilience through targeted investment in green and future-oriented industries.

Principle IV.3: Infrastructure Investment

Invest in both hard and soft infrastructure in transition-impacted areas to reduce outward migration, while attracting and sustaining new industries and businesses.

Principle IV.4: Investing in Research and Development and Financial Support for a Green Economy

Invest in Research and Development (R&D) for a green and circular economy through public and private contributions. Establish national funds to accelerate clean technology adoption and support sustainability efforts such as land restoration, waste management, and decommissioning outdated infrastructure.

Pillar V Participatory Governance



Participatory governance is critical in facilitating a just transition by creating supportive policies, ensuring accountability, addressing community needs, and promoting equitable access to resources for all.

Principle V.1: Multi-Stakeholder Governance

Ensure that stakeholder groups impacted by the transition have meaningful opportunities to co-design transition strategies. Promote collaborative decision-making on just transition measures through inclusive, multi-stakeholder participation mechanisms. Use targeted measures - such as quotas, incentives, and recognition programmes - to enhance the engagement of all affected groups and vulnerable populations.

Principle V.2: Procedural Justice

Ensure that transition-impacted stakeholders have the right and opportunity to have grievances about the transition process or impacts heard and addressed in a timely manner.

Principle V.3: Energy Access and Equity

Policies should ensure affordable and sustainable energy access, addressing concerns about energy security and control, distribution, and ownership.

Pillar VI Institutional Support



Institutional support facilitates tailored education programmes, outreach, alignment of education with industry needs, and provides targeted support for small businesses in fostering resilience and sustainability across communities.

Principle VI.1: Inclusive Outreach Strategies

Outreach should extend beyond active participants to include vulnerable and marginalized groups by organizing events in disadvantaged areas, engaging with education and training institutions, networking with associations representing vulnerable groups, and seeking support from local and regional government institutions.

Principle VI.2: Building Local State Capacity

Ensure local governments have the resources, information, and institutional capacity to implement Just Transition policies effectively in impacted communities.

Principle VI.3: Alignment of Education and Industry Needs

Ensure that vocational and educational institutions offer sustainability-focused training courses to prepare the workforce for green jobs and bridge skills gaps.

Principle VI.4: Supportive and Integrated Policy and Regulatory Frameworks

Ensure that national, regional, and sectoral policy and regulatory frameworks support a just transition by addressing legislative gaps, tailoring policy tools to specific contexts, and coordinating policies across all levels of governance to ensure coherence.

Principle VI.5: Comprehensive Performance Monitoring

Conduct regular, data-driven monitoring of transition processes and outcomes. Use findings to inform continuous improvement efforts to ensure equitable and effective policy decisions.

Principle VI.6: Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Support and Capacity-building

Develop and implement capacity-building programmes for SMEs, integrated into public and private sector efforts to enhance their competitiveness and sustainability.

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