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Just transitions in climate and sustainable governance: a perspective from the South

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Introduction

In its last report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) pointed to human activities as unequivocally being the cause of the emissions of greenhouse gases. Those emissions mainly come from the use of unsustainable energy, land use and how that use changes lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production (IPCC, 2023). This should lead us to reconsider our current way of producing, consuming and living. The IPCC (2023) states that equity, climate justice, social justice, inclusion and just transitions should be prioritised to enable adaptation and climate resilience. And this is best done through political commitment, multilevel governance, laws, policies, strategies and improved access to finance and technology.

It is clear that transitions will be different depending on where they take place. Access to funding, expertise or human resources is crucial, but so is giving attention to the social dimension of this transition. There seems to be a consensus around the need for a socially legitimate, fair and progressive transition to avoid adding new social conflicts (Büchs et al, 2011; Gough, 2013). However, a double challenge that lies ahead is how to reduce environmental degradation without increasing social inequality, not only that based on income, but also that related to access to socio-technical systems or the uneven distribution of the gains and risks of that transition (Kanger and Schot, 2019). Scholars on energy, environment and climate have encapsulated this process into what is commonly known as a 'just transition', which can encompass research areas like energy justice, environmental justice or climate justice (Green, 2018; Heffron and McCauley, 2018). Another strand of the literature proposes a whole-system approach with four justice dimensions – recognition, distribution, procedure and restoration – each of them showing different issues to be considered (Abram et al, 2022).

In all cases there exists a consensus on the need to drive the ecological transition, making sure that the decarbonisation process takes into consideration its impact on workers, employment and social benefits. For instance, Laurent and Pochet (2015) point to three main axes of what they call a social-ecological transition: equality, employment and social protection. Equality would link the idea of environmental justice and greater responsibilities for those who have contributed more to the current climate crises. This would be accompanied not only by the boosting of jobs in green industries, investment in public transport systems and household energy efficiency, and the use of taxes (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020), but also in the need to rethink the current labour paradigm: more productivity does not always lead to more growth and well-being (Laurent and Pochet, 2015). And the third axis of social protection would require an active role from institutions, who are expected to care for and protect the population from the consequences of climate change (for example, disasters after floods or droughts).

In this regard, some authors highlight that climate change policies are likely to have a more negative impact on poor and vulnerable populations, since these policies tend to have a regressive effect (Büchs et al, 2011; Markkanen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019). This is why it is important to consider the specific circumstances the ecological transitions will meet in the Global South, since both 'globals' depart from different starting points. Some researchers in the Global South have also pointed out that sustainability transitions in this region are imbued with the views and technologies of what Northern countries think a transition should be, leading to social injustices and ecological degradations (Kanger and Schot, 2019). Indeed, it is difficult to apply the very Eurocentric eco-social concept to Southern realities, where the concept of just transition better suits Southern problems and contexts. Although the just transition movement has branched into several sections, such as just urban transitions, just rural transitions or just energy transitions (Shirley, 2021), the use of the just transition linked to the impact of climate change in the energy sector and on jobs is one of the main focuses. Indeed, one of the most accepted definitions of just transition is that of the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2015a), who defined it as 'greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind'.

With this in mind, and while trying to bring together the eco-social and the just transition concepts, the remainder of the chapter will focus on how the three main elements of a social-ecological transition as identified by Laurent and Pochet (2015) – equality, employment and social protection – and the concept of just transition are approached in the Global South, as well as how the particularities in the South are addressed. The three countries that will be used to exemplify how those transitions are being approached are India, Kenya and Argentina.

Understanding (just) transitions in the Global South

Although the Paris Agreement (2015) does not make any explicit reference to the process of a just transition, let alone eco-social transitions, its preamble does portray a just transition of the workforce as an imperative and links it with the creation of decent work and quality jobs. To be embraced widely, the transition should leave as few people behind as possible, which could be a realistic aim if this transition were used as a strong driver of job creation, social justice and poverty reduction (ILO, 2015b). It is important that this transition happens in the Global South, since that is where the most vulnerable populations and countries exist. They will be more affected than those countries that are historically more responsible for this challenge. For instance, the IPCC (2023) states that the increasing frequency of extreme weather and climate events is exposing millions of peoples in Africa, Asia and South America to acute food and water insecurity, consequently driving increasing displacement. All this is happening in areas already suffering from inequality, poverty and population growth, as well as profound economic and social inequalities.

The concept of just transition has been developed mainly in the Global North, though the Global South is also exposed to multiple challenges, many of which are far from those in the North. As a result, transitions are to be adapted to each specific reality. Latin America, for instance, heavily relies on natural resource extraction, while the levels of energy production and consumption have increased in the last decade (Pucheta and Sánchez, 2022). When examining the creation of *green jobs* in Latin America, some prospects suggest the creation of 22 million new jobs in the areas of sustainable energy, agriculture, forestry and construction, paired with the loss of 7.5 million jobs linked to fossil fuel extraction and electricity generation, or animal-based food production (Saget et al, 2020). One of the main obstacles, however, is the lack of workers with appropriate skills that could help to increase the gains that the population could benefit from with the ecological transition in the region. For instance, while 13.4 million new green jobs will be in medium-skill occupations and 1 million in high-skill work, 23 million young people were not in education, employment or training in 2019 (Saget et al, 2020). Therefore, this can be used as an opportunity to boost education and the economy within a greener path.

In the case of Africa, most of the economies are largely undiversified and rely predominantly on agriculture, putting a special burden on smallholder farmers and on food security (Carleton, 2022). The United Nations Environment Programme foresees the creation of millions of green jobs in Africa in areas including renewable energies, sustainable digital infrastructure (like internet connectivity solutions or e-waste management), transport or sustainable agricultural supply chains (UNEP, 2023). This, in a country with the largest rates of informal work in the world (76 per cent; Otlhogile and Shirley, 2023), has the potential of improving the lives and working conditions of millions of people.

Asia is home to 90 per cent of coal-fired power plants under 20 years of age, and any transition is seen as having negative consequences in the social and labour sectors. In 2024 it is foreseen to become the third-largest coal-consuming region in the world (IEA, 2020; Anbumozhi et al, 2023). The ILO estimates that more than 14 million (net) green jobs could be created in the Asia-Pacific region by 2030 if necessary conditions are met (ILO, 2018). However, just like in other regions of the Global South, the transition will need to deal with the lack of teachers and trainers in new green areas, along with ensuring that workers have the necessary skills (ILO, 2019).

As already described, one of the challenges of transitions in Southern countries is that their economies are not only dependent on heavily polluting activities such as mining or energy, but also on some that will be impacted the most by climate change, like agriculture. Also, these economic sectors face high rates of informality and precariousness, which add to the ongoing high inflation and to classic gender disparities in access to jobs (Pucheta and Sánchez, 2022; Otlhogile and Shirley, 2023). Illegality or legal ambiguity is also identified in the land rights of Indigenous populations, who often find that the lands they have lived on for centuries have been offered as concessions to timber or oil companies (Atteridge et al, 2022). In this regard, several publications highlight the need for incorporating all these actors (whose activities are sometimes labelled as 'illegal') into discussions to ensure a just transition (Atteridge et al, 2022; Pucheta and Sánchez, 2022).

Linked to this is the impact of external forces in the perpetuation of unfair employment conditions. One example is when the extraction of cobalt for mobile phone production is done under despicable work conditions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and those same devices end up in vast dumps in Ghana when citizens in the North decide to change their mobile phones (Sovacool et al, 2020). Other examples include coal mining and the textile and garment sector, which have a significant weight in many countries in the region, both because of the negative environmental impact and the high rates of employment in those sectors (ILO, 2019, 2022). Both sectors are closely linked to consumption patterns in developed economies, where the use and disposal of all kinds of products is a scourge. Therefore, we must consider how injustices in developing economies are perpetuated by the lifestyles and regulations in developed economies. Not acknowledging this will almost certainly accentuate inequalities and socio-economic divisions, further destabilising these regions (Otlhogile and Shirley, 2023).

No just transitions for the South?

India, Kenya and Argentina are three developing economies on three different continents with very diverse economic and social situations. While the three of them are leading economies in their respective regions, their needs are not alike. India is focused on providing energy to its population and on poverty reduction. Kenya has an emerging urban middle class and is highly dependent on agriculture. Out of the three, Argentina is the most developed economy, with around US$10,600 GDP per capita in 2021, and with high levels of development in all areas. Meanwhile, both India and Kenya had a GDP per capita of around US$2,000–3,000 in 2021.

To analyse how India, Kenya and Argentina are approaching the just transition and eco-social processes, two main sources have been examined: Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), a system where countries relate how they will face climate change to comply with the Paris Agreement (2015), and the voluntary national reports (VNRs) on the implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The concept of just transition is not necessarily embraced by Southern countries. However, this research seeks to identify how they approach employment, equality and social protection in these national documents, which somehow envisage their plans and initiatives to live more sustainably during the following decades.

Not a just transition in India

In its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) (MOEFCC, 2015) and its updated first NDC (MOEFCC, 2022), India does not use the word 'transition', let alone the concept of a just transition. However, the INDC and NDC include the term 'climate justice' in their titles, as well as the idea of 'social justice'. While equality is also a term foreign to these documents, the INDC mentions the need to eradicate poverty as the first goal through the promotion of economic growth and social development.

In the last few years, the country has added new electricity connections for 50 million citizens (IEA, 2022), reaching a stunning 97 per cent of electrification (Agrawal et al, 2020). Given that electrification has been achieved through fossil fuels, fossil energy consumption is rapidly growing in India. In its INDC (2015) (MOEFCC, 2015), India suggests that the technology and finance from developed economies is required to ensure economic growth and is achieved with a low level of emissions. The clean energy transition is already under way: the country has surpassed the goal of meeting 40 per cent of its power capacity from non-fossil fuels almost a decade ahead of its commitment to the Paris Agreement, thanks to the spectacular growth of the share of solar and wind plants (IEA, 2022). The country is well placed to become a global leader in renewable batteries and green hydrogen (IEA, 2022), but it also faces a few challenges, such as the spike in the price of energy and how to ensure that this transition benefits its population. Among its initiatives to achieve affordable and clean energy, the government is strongly focused on comparatively low-cost renewable energy and the improvement of energy efficiency enforcement standards and labelling (NITI Aayog, 2020).

The concept of just transition is also absent in India's SDG VNR, but the idea of equality is somehow present, if mostly related to gender equality. However, the 2030 agenda is embraced as a framework to ensure faster economic growth, equality and inclusion. The agenda underlines that these goals will be achieved, for instance, through the promotion of income growth, access to education, social protection measures or financial inclusion (NITI Aayog, 2020). The document mentions initiatives on sustainable urbanisation and mobility, sustainable food systems, waste management and clean energy (NITI Aayog, 2020), all of them being key sectors for increasing employment levels with a smaller footprint.

The idea of social protection, although mentioned in the VNR, is not connected with how to protect those most impacted by an energy transition, but with the need to improve livelihood support, health protection or income assistance to vulnerable populations (NITI Aayog, 2020). Despite all of this, the idea of how to reduce the impact of climate change on citizens is not present. In all likelihood, it is the 2030 Agenda rather than the Paris Agreement which promotes some goals that eventually will help reduce the intensity of the impacts of an energy transition in the country, namely SDG7 on clean and affordable energy, SDG8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG12 on sustainable consumption. These SDGs are promoting ideas like the improvement of wages, the promotion of labour rights or the need for resource efficiency (NITI Aayog, 2020). However, there is not a link to how these sectors can be oriented in a way that they contribute to an energy transition and citizens' resilience to the impacts of climate change.

Leave no one behind in Kenya

Kenya's leading source of emissions in 2015 was agriculture, mainly due to livestock and the use of fertilisers (MOEF, 2020). For Kenya, poverty alleviation and sustainable economic development are key priorities. The country underlines that climate change is to be addressed on a fair basis, considering historical responsibility and respective capabilities (MOEF, 2020).

Kenya's NDC mentions the concept of just transition only once. It identifies a just transition with the need for social protection, and for dialogue with different stakeholders to ensure all interests are included in the climate action (MOEF, 2020). Although superficially, and not strictly connected to a just transition, the NDC states that the country adopts an 'all of society approach' in tackling climate change, engaging all its actors as part of its adaptation and mitigation priorities. While it does not contain the concept of just transition per se, Kenya's development agenda is guided by the Kenya Vision 2030, a long-term development road map that comprises three main pillars: economic, social and political. Eventually, these pillars present very similar ideas to the SDGs Status Report (PS Planning, 2019). It includes the concept of 'leave no one behind', acknowledging the requirement to increase access to education and income, end poverty and ensure that all people have clean water, sanitation and energy. However, the 'leave no one behind' framework is more oriented towards the development of the country than to reducing the impacts of an energy transition on society.

The SDGs Status Report also mentions a Green Economy Strategy to address key challenges such as poverty, unemployment or environmental degradation. It is connected, however, to accelerating growth, to having a cleaner environment and to having higher productivity, but not to enhancing the well-being of people (PS Planning, 2019).

Kenya's National Adaptation Plan 2015–30 recognises that climate change has negative economic, social and environmental impacts, and therefore adaptation and development goals should complement each other (MENR, 2016). The Adaptation Plan includes the Vision 2030 initiative and, for instance, in the section on gender, vulnerable groups and youth, it highlights strengthening social protection for these groups. Even the section on human resource development, labour and employment considers reducing the vulnerability of Kenyans through economic growth and more employment opportunities as a part of 'climate-compatible development'. Training and development of new skills to increase national resilience to climate change is also mentioned (MENR, 2016). However, it is difficult to deduce from this plan alone that the country has integrated a genuine social-ecological prism that considers the impacts that a transition will have on its citizens.

Argentina's just transition

Argentina's Second National Determined Contribution is a perfect example of how to integrate the 2030 Agenda in the country's plan to address climate change. Throughout its NDC, references to a just transition – citing how to reduce the negative impacts of climate change on citizens – are constant. The country embraces the need to drive its people towards a just transition: an Argentina that is resilient, sustainable, inclusive, innovative and that does not leave any of their citizens behind (MAyDS, 2020).

The NDC includes a section on labour and just transition, where it is underlined that the creation of new sustainable jobs will be fostered, and that it will be guaranteed that workers have access to financial resources so they can adapt their activities to climate change (MAyDS, 2020). A section on just transition highlights the need to adapt productive systems, the tripartite dialogue, the importance of creating sustainable jobs, and appropriate training. References to equity and harnessing the fight against climate change to improve the life of citizens are also included in the document (MAyDS, 2020, p 26).

Argentina's 2022 SDGs voluntary report delves into the same idea. It envisions a country that is more sustainable, supportive and fair. It urges the country to assume the energy transition as a priority and to take advantage of the potential of the transition and the environmental sustainability to create green jobs in different areas (Presidencia Argentina, 2022). It could be argued that the case of Argentina is a perfect example of how to integrate the three pillars of the social-ecological transition as framed by Laurent and Pochet (2015): fostering equality, employment and social protection as the main axes.

Conclusion

It is likely that the idea of a social-ecological transition can be better applied to developed economies than to developing economies. A transition as Laurent (2021) proposes, which includes progressive taxes, reduction of fossil fuel subsidies, social spending and the building of a social-ecological protection system, is surely better implemented in European countries than in countries where access to energy is the main concern. Indeed, most of the studies on eco-social policies focus on the European Union or other developed economies (for instance, Laurent, 2021; Mandelli, 2022; Mandelli et al, 2023), overlooking the realities of the rest of the world and ignoring their problems, needs and priorities. As it has been revealed above, the framework of 'just transition' seems a better fit for required changes in the Global South, but even the concept of just transition is absent in the documents examined from India and Kenya, which are more focused on development than on just development.

If just transition processes are to succeed in the Global South, sustainable development and climate action must occur simultaneously to address the different political, economic and social challenges that each country faces. This means that developed economies will have to give developing economies access to technology, investment and transition-relevant resources and infrastructure, skipping the need for using fossil fuels in their development, as has occurred in the Global North.

Additionally, there are several elements to ensuring the appropriation of the processes and the implementation of projects: community engagement, dialogue with local communities and access to the right equipment at the right price (Richardson-Barlow et al, 2022). Dialogue and community engagement will be necessary in any transition that strives to be equitable. At this point, special care should be given to ensure that traditional cultural practices and habits in Indigenous communities are respected in a way that acculturation is avoided. For example, the impact of electrification and internet access on cultural traditions should be considered (Hege et al, 2022; Richardson-Barlow et al, 2022). Another issue to consider is how international climate finance is focusing on implementing techno-economic transitions, which is the view of Northern countries, and leaves little to ensure that transitions are environmentally, economically and socially fair for the population (Atteridge et al, 2022). As some researchers in the South suggest, it is important that transitions in the South consider their own resistances, struggles and culture (Gosh et al, 2021).

The three cases examined show very different approaches to climate change, to energy and to the concept of just transition. Kenya and India see the climate crisis as an opportunity for the country's development, but they do not link it with a just transition or with the need to ensure that the most vulnerable populations and those most impacted by that transition are protected, despite incorporating the 'leave no one behind' framework in their policies (in the case of Kenya). The case of Argentina is quite different, and the idea of a just transition is all over its NDC and the implementation of the Agenda 2030 (PS Planning, 2019). In this regard, it would be interesting to examine whether the use by governments of the just transition or the social-ecological transition concept has anything to do with the economy's level of development or the advancement of the welfare state.

Additionally, at the practical level, there could be potential in including an eco-social gaze at transitions, especially in the South, since incorporating aspects such as equality and social protection in the implementation of policies could contribute to minimising the impacts of climate change on millions of citizens. An eco-social gaze can also help at the academic level to understand both analytically and empirically the benefits and obstacles to these processes, and therefore contribute to potential better practices.

In any case, transitions will necessarily be different in Northern and Southern 'globals'. Since the main emissions on each side come from different sources, and since the levels of equality, employment and social protection are radically different, approaches towards transitions will need to be different too. For instance, while energy consumption is the greatest source of greenhouse gas emissions in European countries, this is not the case in most developing economies, like Kenya or India, where great pockets of energy poverty or low electricity access rates exist. This is why the energy sector is not always seen as a priority in the Global South. Indeed, in the absence of cleaner and fair-priced technology, fossil fuels are seen as the only available option for their development.

The training of workers with proper skills is key in any energy and ecological transition for both the North and the South. Green jobs are to be promoted considering the impact the transition will have on workers. It will be more the social support than the economic growth that will contribute to a fair and just transition for all. It is true, though, that without finance, little social support can be delivered.

Given all these considerations and the multiple crises ahead, there are several areas of research that could help advance eco-social transitions, thus having a positive impact on the population of the Global South. One possible line of research could be the way that technology from the North can accelerate transitions in the South. Another possible field of study could be good practices in the North and requirements on how transitions in the South may be harmful for ancestral practices and Indigenous communities. It would also be interesting to understand the paths to eco-social and just transitions to identify the links between development levels and welfare states. In all cases, we need both conceptual advances – for instance, what eco-social transition means in a Southern country – and empirical works that help understand the difficulties in translating Northern practices to Southern realities and the theory to practice.

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