

Engaging People for Just Transitions

What are just transitions?

To address the pressing challenge of climate change, there is an urgent need for transitions in energy, food, transportation and other systems. Meanwhile, there are groups of people, including workers in carbon-intensive sectors, who lose out in the transition process and are impacted negatively, socially and economically. At its core, the idea of just transitions reflects the notion that transitions need to fully consider their needs, including the creation of new opportunities in the greener and lower-carbon economies built to replace carbon-intensive sectors.

It's important to acknowledge that there are a range of definitions and dimensions of just transitions. Narrow definitions present a barrier to stimulating successful citizen engagement across varied contexts. Dominant approaches reduce the issue to creating 'green jobs' and providing compensation and retraining without confronting broader issues of economic injustice or the inequalities which give rise to 'unjust transitions'. Broader approaches emphasise the need for larger system change, including a focus on forms of distributional, recognitional, restorative and procedural justice.

Given that different areas of policy will have disparate spaces, levers, and intervention points for facilitating citizen engagement, it is vital that broader and more integrated conceptions of just transitions are debated, recognising the multiple historical and contemporary injustices they are seeking to reckon with.

The challenge

For just transitions to be successful and socially acceptable, diverse groups will need to be engaged in the design and implementation of transition policies across all scales and sectors. So, how can we support this engagement?

Though the combinations, scale, and intensity of justice challenges associated with deepening and accelerating energy transitions to address the climate crisis appear to be unprecedented, the questions of mobilisation and alliance-building, participation and inclusion in decision-making (from local to global) on issues of energy and resource use are clearly not new.

Therefore, our research asked two key questions:

1. What can be learned from current struggles over just transitions and relevant past experience of citizen attempts to centre justice issues?
 2. Are there key insights that might inform contemporary efforts to ensure that energy transitions are just transitions?
-

Understanding citizen engagement with just transitions

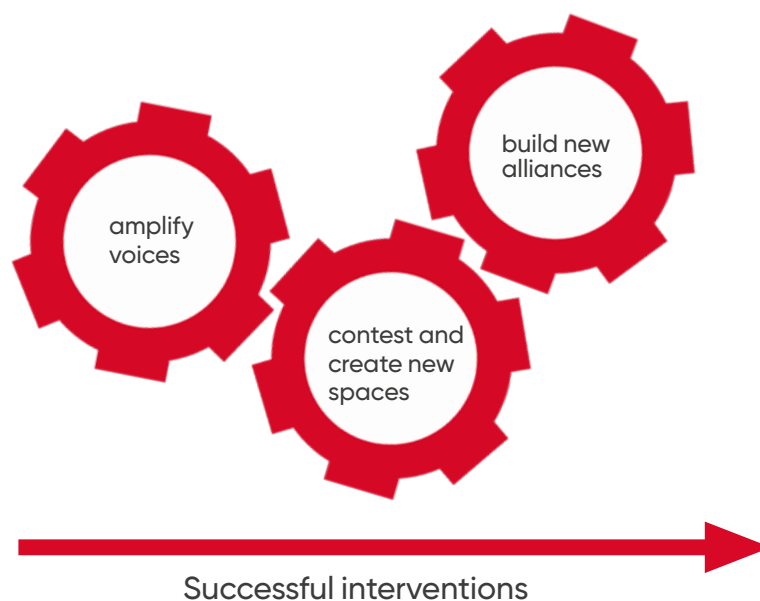
We examined a diverse set of literature and experiences of amplifying and representing voices, creating and defending spaces, and building alliances that directly or indirectly relate to just transitions.

Coverage and analysis of these includes the discussion of whose voices count; the politics of participation, representation, and intermediation; and attempts by protest and social movements to work across the spectrum of invited, closed, and claimed spaces of change.

Evidence demonstrates that successful interventions need to simultaneously amplify voice, contest and create new spaces, and build new alliances effectively.

Figure 1: Voices, spaces and alliances

Source: Authors' own



It is helpful to think in terms of an ecosystem of transformation, with different lever points that actors can use to propel climate action according to the arenas and spaces they have access to, the resources they have available to them, and their overall aims.

Barriers to building alliances

Climate change affects everyone from local frontline communities to national and global stakeholders, albeit to different degrees and in different ways and over different timeframes.

While this could open up lots of possibilities for new alliances, in practice many struggles are stuck in particular silos and associated with different interests. This further complicates the work of alliance-building across spaces, regions, and sectors.

This can be exacerbated by what has been referred to as the 'governance trap' where politicians are reluctant to accelerate transitions for fear of public backlash, yet the public expects leadership on the part of politicians. This can often result in the misreading and misallocation of rights and responsibilities between individuals and institutions.

However, there are growing numbers of environmental, trade union, extractives governance and human rights organisations that are engaging with just transition issues in a diversity of ways that could potentially help to create or hold open space for more inclusive dialogues on energy futures.

Despite the shrinking of civic space in many regions, this is an area of intensifying advocacy on the part of a wide and growing range of civil society organisations (CSOs) and has the potential to play a positive role in amplifying the voices of communities on the frontlines of energy transition in local, national, and global debates.

Yet, as in many campaigns and social movements, there are often disconnects between local, national, and global groups, raising questions of legitimacy about who speaks, for whom, in which spaces, when energy policymaking is multi-scalar and multi-sited and crosses so many sectors, calling for horizontal alliances between movements.

Within these movements, there may be deep divisions between organisations who want to 'leave fossil fuels in the ground' for environmental reasons, and those who advocate for a slower rate of withdrawal from oil and gas production, emphasising the need to capture benefits, especially for developing countries, grounded in claims of rights to development and significantly reduced historical responsibility for depleting carbon budgets to date.

Seven potential strategies and intervention points

Within the literature and experiences we examined, we have found different categories of strategies for amplifying voices, creating and accessing spaces for change, and building alliances.

The strategies may be:

- **anticipatory** (around planned projects and the impacts they might have, positive and negative),
- **restorative** (mitigating and cleaning up effects of past extraction),
- **visioning**, as well as seeking to envision (building alternatives and creating economic and social alternatives).

The seven strategies can be employed at various stages of the energy policy cycle.

1. Invited spaces – usually created by authorities

- National referendums.
- Panels and commissions dealing with energy issues.
- Citizen assemblies.
- National advisory panels.
- Prior consultations and Free Prior and Informed Consent processes.

Example: Costa Rica's Climate Change Advisory Council

The Citizens' Advisory Council on Climate Change, also known as 5C, was created in 2018 by the Costa Rican Ministry of the Environment and Energy in fulfilment of one of its commitments under the Paris Agreement. The Council is made up of representatives of a cross-section of civil society, indigenous, business, and trade union groups that are engaged with the climate issue. The purpose of the Council is to become a deliberative space that advises the Ministry of Environment and Energy on issues related to climate change.

In turn, the Ministry, along with other government entities, may submit to the Council consultations on the design, implementation and evaluation of their climate policies, programmes, and metrics. The Council then monitors the implementation of the National Determined Contribution presented by Costa Rica to the Conference of the Parties and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to climate change and its effects.

Although participants are selected, the council meets regularly, and this is described as a form of 'co-governance' where through such democratic innovations 'non-binding decisions' result.

2. Spaces created or claimed by citizens

- Citizen juries. These are selected 'randomly' from lists provided by a representative range of community-based associations.
- Citizen-led consultations. These can take the form of popular referendums or plebiscites on key issues.
- People's hearings. This can include setting up informal hearings for energy companies and stakeholders to publicly discuss a company's activities.

Example: Ciudad Viva (Living City)

In 1997, in Santiago, Chile, a social movement emerged in opposition to the country's first major highway concession, to challenge and change urban planning models. The campaign founded a citizen-led planning institution, Ciudad Viva (Living City), which centred citizens as planners, rather than engaging them as participants at determined points in a planning process.

3. Strengthening accountability

- Popular plebiscites.
- Citizen guides, for example, toolkits, guides and handbooks for strengthening capacities of movements.
- Participatory budgeting, when citizens choose where funds are spent.
- Ombudspersons for future generations, who represent a collection of interests of people not directly represented through democratic process and policy decision-making.

4. Contesting expertise, building knowledge

- Challenging dominant narratives to increase citizen voice .
- Developing new narratives from below – listening projects or participatory scenario-building to elicit local grass-roots views of what a just future would look like to them.
- Energy justice through Participatory Multi-Criteria Analysis (PMCA). The methods for this analysis can vary but tend to define potential solutions and involve stakeholders by gathering objectives or inviting them to evaluate.
- Citizen science, which can include citizen monitoring of the social and environmental impacts of projects.

5. Protest politics

- Oppositional strategies of contestation that use civil disobedience to disrupt.
- ‘Civil regulation’, where informal regulation of private business is used to try and fill governance gaps – in instances when there is no legislation, or it’s not enforced. This can be shareholder activism, media campaigns, organised boycotts, or joint investor initiatives aimed at largest greenhouse gas emitters.
- Local meetings, demonstrations and occupations.

Example: Keystone Pipeline XL

Indigenous leaders and allies opposed plans to extend the existing Keystone oil pipeline to run through the US state of Montana.

They held a March–May 2019 training tour for 1,160 people in nine US cities answering the call to stop the pipeline and protect water and ancestral lands. The project’s license was withdrawn in April 2020.

6. Using the law

- Legal challenges over human rights, land, procedural injustices and environmental impacts, including lawsuits brought to governments by youth climate activists.
- Environmental justice clinics, where lawyers provide pro bono support to activists.

7. Transnational spaces for civic engagement

- Campaigning on regional trade policy.
- Transnational climate change governance initiatives (involving governments, businesses and development banks).
- Targeting global institutions or specific infrastructures.
- Targeting funds for climate and energy finance, including global fossil fuel subsidies.

Example: Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP)

REEEP is an international public–private partnership funded by governments, businesses and development banks, aimed at identifying barriers to and potential for the uptake of renewable energy and energy efficiency opportunities.

New openings for just transitions

In addition to these strategies from literature and past experiences, we do see several examples emerging of promising attempts to strengthen and amplify local and national voices in this debate, despite the obstacles to citizen engagements around just transitions.

These have taken a number of approaches including cutting the supply of finance for fossil fuel investment, as well as holding richer governments to account for their own ongoing support for fossil fuels even as they demand poorer countries forgo the extraction of fossil fuels.

There has also been a push for greater transparency of information shared from the energy sector and examples of litigation against individual fossil fuel projects. It is also important to note that some of this resistance is being articulated around novel articulations of intersectional, multigenerational, multicultural indigenous-led movements seeking to contest climate injustices and the criminalisation of land protection, and expressing forms of anti-colonial solidarity.

What this activism seeks to contest are the ways in which indigenous people are particularly affected by the injustices of fossil fuels. In these instances, fossil fuels happen to be the campaign focus, but the activism is aimed at contesting, dismantling, and decolonising the very power structures, hierarchies, and failures of recognition which permit and enable these injustices to take place in the first place, and routinely distribute the greatest costs of fossil fuel expansion to poorer classes and to people of colour.

Lessons for practice

- For transformative change, citizens need to be actively and directly engaged with just transitions. Tools and processes for citizen engagement need to deliberately target and enable traditionally excluded and vulnerable groups to participate in decision-making.
- Citizens should be engaged not just on climate and energy policy, but also closely related issues, such as transport, agriculture and housing.
- Building alliances across levels (local, national, international) and across sectors and groups is critical.
- There is significant scope for learning and innovation between citizens, governments, companies and regional and international organisations.
- Some tools, strategies and approaches are currently under-used in this field, but have demonstrated significant potential. These include citizen assemblies, citizen auditing of projects, plans and policies, participatory adaptation planning, participatory budgeting and standing independent panels and commissions.
- Enhancing citizen engagement is not the sole responsibility of civil society actors. It should be shared between those wielding power in governments, cities, corporations, and international institutions, for example, and civil society actors.

Implications for funders

- There is an urgent need to fund networking and alliance-building processes between actors at the local, national and international levels, and across sectors not only to build momentum, but also to exchange positive learning, experience and promising innovations through living labs and platforms.
- Such interventions can add most value by supporting marginalised groups and neglected issues that are not addressed in national level-invited spaces.
- We need greater nuance and clarity about who is engaging with just transitions, how, when, where, why and around which types of transition. Further funds are needed to facilitate research and learning about emerging practice in order to accelerate progress towards just transitions.

This executive summary is based on a Working Paper, where you can find further details on strategies, lessons and examples of approaches:

Newell, P.; Price, R. and Daley, F. (2023) [Landscapes of \(In\)justice: Reflecting on Voices, Spaces, and Alliances for Just Transition](#), IDS Working Paper 594, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/IDS.2023.047

Acknowledgements

This executive summary was authored collectively by John Gaventa, Rosie McGee, Pete Newell, Roz Price and Alice Webb.

Suggested citation:

Gaventa, J.; McGee, R.; Newell, P.; Price, R. and Webb, A. (2024) [Engaging People for Just Transitions: Executive Summary](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, [DOI: 10.19088/IDS.2023.059](#)

This paper was supported in part by a Ford Foundation grant Learning at the Intersections of Just Transitions: Spaces For Engagement, Voices from the Margins and Cross-Sectoral Alliances in Resource-Rich Countries of the Global South ('Just Transitions Learning Project'). We gratefully acknowledge this support. The opinions expressed in the paper are the authors' own and do not reflect the views of the Ford Foundation.

The paper is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence \(CC BY\)](#), which permits unrestricted use or distribution in any medium, provided the original authors and sources are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

