

A Just Transition for the Global South

Executive Summary



Learning from alliances and movements
in the Philippines and South Africa



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How to strengthen the collective power of civil society, trade unions and politics in order to achieve a just and democratic green transition for the Global South.

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Citation: Konstant T, Gustafson R and Unnbom C. 2021. A JUST TRANSITION FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH—Learning from alliances and movements in the Philippines and South Africa. Executive Summary. Olof Palme International Center and SOLIDAR.
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Why engage for a Just Transition?

The ongoing environmental and climate breakdown threatens our existence and all future development. We must all work together to stop this crisis. The necessary changes are not taking place, and time has already run out—but the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that powerful measures can be found when we put our minds to it.

The international trade union movement has called for a ‘Just Transition’ towards a fossil-free, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable world. The switch to a climate-friendly economy must be fair to workers and all vulnerable people.

We must face the challenges with a clear vision of inclusive and sustainable societies. We can do it if there is the courage and political will to put our common future first.

**Anna Sundström, Secretary General,
Olof Palme International Center and SOLIDAR
International Cooperation Forum Co-Chair**



About Just Transition

The concept of Just Transition comes from the trade union movement. It has been taken up by governments and civil society who see the need for rights and justice in the response to the climate and environmental crisis. Workers and ordinary people should not be carrying the burden of reducing emissions.

For centuries, the Global North has built its economies on carbon emissions, accumulating vast wealth and creating extremes of global inequality. A world-wide Just Transition must take historic and current injustices into account and compensate the Global South for losses due to the climate crisis, ensuring that the costs are shared fairly.

The purpose of this study

This is the summary of the study “A Just Transition for the Global South”. In it, leaders and activists in both the Global South and North reflect on the question: “How can movement-building and alliances, citizens’ voices and social inclusion influence national policy, action and popular support for Just Transition? And what is needed to optimise the capacity of those involved?”

The study is intended to inform support and learning for a Just Transition in the Global South. We chose the Philippines and South Africa as our two focus countries. Both face severe difficulties in transitioning away from fossil fuels, as well as with the impacts of the climate crisis. Twenty respondents from trade unions, civil society, academia and political parties in these countries were interviewed, along with labour support organisations in the Global North.

Who are the activists?

This study focuses on trade unions, civil society and political parties, as the structures leading the social engagement for a Just Transition in the Global South. They have slightly different, but overlapping positions and perspectives, they each play a role in Just Transition and have an opportunity to grow in their roles through more inclusive and connected alliances and movements.

Trade unions

Their role: Unions are the leaders in ensuring workers’ rights in a Just Transition. As industries move away from fossil fuels and other environmentally destructive practices, jobs will change, and some workers may lose their jobs while other new, green jobs are created. Unions are at the heart of ensuring that workers are properly consulted, and that opportunities for retraining, changing professions and financial safety nets are real and on a massive scale.

Rising to the challenge: Apart from the national trade union federations, knowledge and awareness of Just Transition among local and national unions is minimal in the Global South. Far more communication is needed with workers and between unions about the climate response, national commitments, changing industries and emerging opportunities.

Worker education and influence will be critical to a Just Transition. Unions will also need to take more of a role collaborating with communities, including informal workers, and working both within sectors and across different sectors. Unions will need to anticipate and plan for the coming shifts. They will need to develop systems to ensure that union members and other workers get through these changes with decent jobs and social protection at the other end.

Civil society

Their role: Different organisations from small community groups through to major international NGOs all fall under the civil society umbrella. They work in activism and direct action, deliver services to people in need, do research, raise public awareness and build movements. They help to inform policies at global and national levels. They are also created through local level collectives to help within their communities or raise the voices of the most marginalised.

Rising to the challenge: The variety of civil society is both a strength and a weakness. These diverse groups don’t necessarily share the same vision, pull in the same direction or consult outside of their own group. People need to come together in movements and alliances, and take the time to work out a common goal and understand the different angles in a complex situation.

For example, environmental activists might not fully grasp the impact on workers and their families and need to include the “Just” part in their advocacy for a green transition. At the same time, organisations working for human rights, including workers’ rights, need to push for urgent and feasible climate and environmental solutions, that are fair to those most affected. Civil society will play a more effective role if all its diverse members understand the bigger picture when demanding solutions, ideally in unison.

Political parties

Their role: Parties should serve as a link between citizens and political power, enabling people to contribute to political decisions. Progressive political leaders can become activists and champions with a lot of influence.

Governments trust their own internal advisors to draft policies, draw from research and reach a position that is influenced by the interests of many different actors in society. Good relationships in alliances help civil society and unions to support, guide and inform political champions for a Just Transition.

Rising to the challenge: Political parties and activists for policy change are part of the political system. They must work with election cycles, and demonstrate progress for Just Transition in a short period of time, while simultaneously trying to embed long-term reforms.



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JUST TRANSITION
OR TRANSITION TO
JUSTICE

Radicalise Just Transition

The climate and ecological crisis is driven by capitalism. Capitalism drives inequality. Global injustice and the global economy are two sides of the same coin. We need to overturn the idea of eternal economic growth as a measure of wellbeing, rather than the fair distribution of resources, social wellbeing or environmental sustainability. We need to replace capitalism with a system with more equal distributive power and limits to wastefulness.

Much more than decent jobs

With its roots in global inequality, the climate and ecological crisis in the Global South is part of many different and historic challenges and injustices. The Global South has dealt with greater levels of gender injustice, land-grabbing, extractivism, poverty, lack of access to basic rights and services for centuries. **Just Transition must address many injustices in the Global South—it is part of the bigger problems of society.**

“We have a planetary crisis and an inequality crisis. We can’t address the climate crisis without addressing the inequality that is creating it. Just Transition must address both at once.”

Civil society, South Africa

“Capitalism as a system does not work—it is unjust and unsustainable. And justice and sustainability are key principles in the environmental justice movements.”

Academia, South Africa

Women are most affected

Taking inequality further—where there are injustices, they affect women most. Women are most vulnerable, whether around unemployment or poor employment; livelihoods and access to land; health and wellbeing in places affected by pollution and climate disaster. Where there are other intersectionalities like poverty, disability, racialisation or indigenous people’s rights, the women among them are the most impacted. A Just Transition must place women at the centre.

“The extractive industry inflicts a lot of harm and violence, on women’s bodies specifically. There is so much risk in our communities to women particularly—and so much repression.”

Civil society, South Africa

Neoliberalism has hijacked the climate response

Instead of a shift to greater equality, however, respondents observed increasing privatisation, especially in the energy sector. After several decades of neoliberal economic decline and rising inequalities, corporate interests and capital are gaining even more power over the global economy.

“Without a Just Transition and reclaiming energy as a public good, climate change will become another form of capitalism in which workers are exploited.”

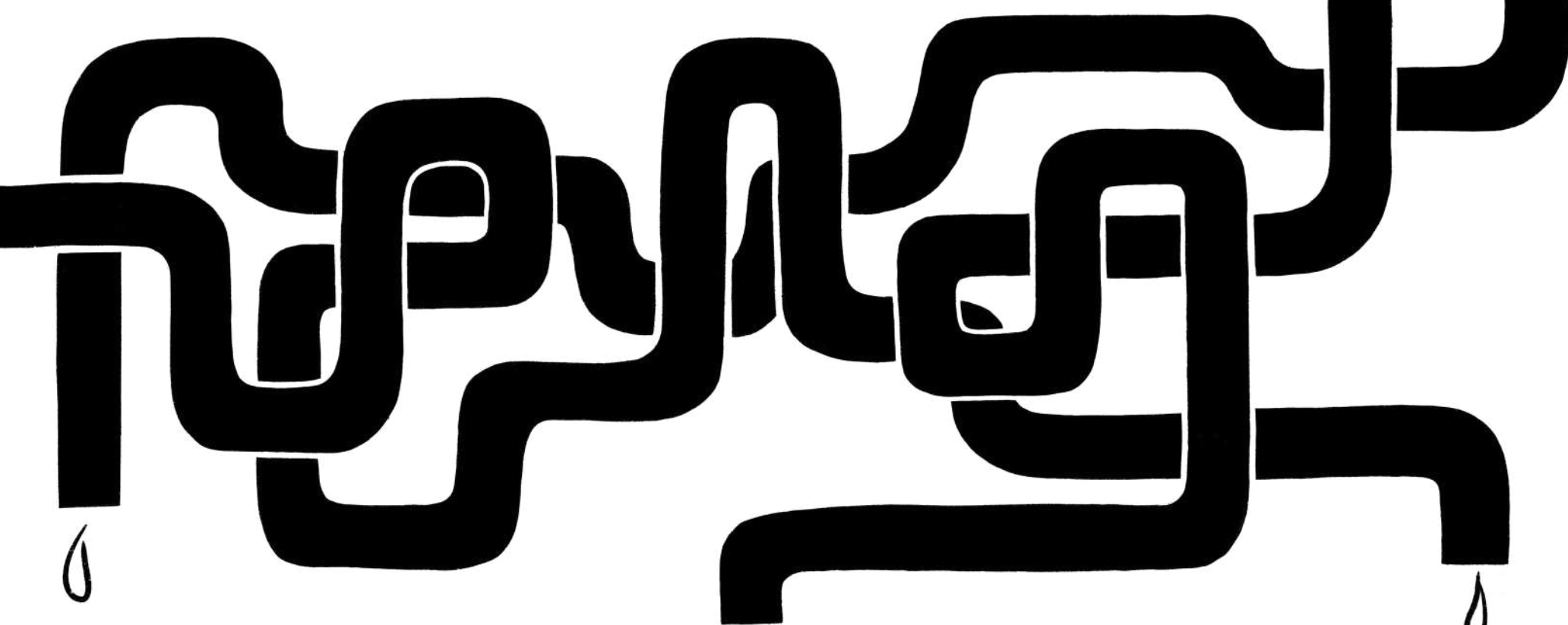
Civil society, South Africa

Green extractivism: Same wolf, different clothing

The colonial concept that the Global South is a source of inexpensive raw materials for the North underpins the exploitation of resources and people for so-called green products. Mining for rare minerals has suddenly and dramatically increased due to increased demand for climate-friendly technology. These growing industries are linked to land-grabbing, pollution and the destruction of local ecosystems. Many of those fighting to protect their environment, land and livelihoods face extreme danger. Leaders, activists and communities are subjected to intimidation, violence and even assassination.



A Just Transition must place women’s needs and voices at the centre. – © Mujahid Safodien / Greenpeace



DEMOCRATISING
A JUST TRANSITION:
LOCAL MOVEMENTS

Eco-socialism

As well as national and global shifts, **Just Transition is about taking local action and establishing local movements.** People are asking for radical changes to the global economic system, at the same time as working for much more control of local issues by local people. Local movements are needed to enable broader access to both the benefits and the means of production.

“We are defending our village and sea against too much extraction from the big shipping companies from other countries. We are protecting indigenous communities and their traditional fishing practices. This is all part of a Just Transition—taking into account the use of land, the management of our coastal areas, and more suitable housing.”

Political party, Philippines

Local movements reclaiming local power

Local action needs local level cooperation, coordination, participatory planning and management. These processes are not easy. People need to come together to find sustainable solutions to local problems. Communities may plan development in their area that fulfils their holistic social and economic demands while also maintaining and restoring the health of their natural heritage with the right information and support. Some of the factors that create success are:

1. **Representation**—as many parts of the community should be part of decision-making as possible.
2. **Transparency**—decisions and processes need to be openly shared.
3. **Trust**—those in the lead need to be trusted and utterly honest.



Farmers in Maguindanao are reviving indigenous, organic ways of growing food in order to protect soil and health. – © Grace Duran-Cabus / Greenpeace

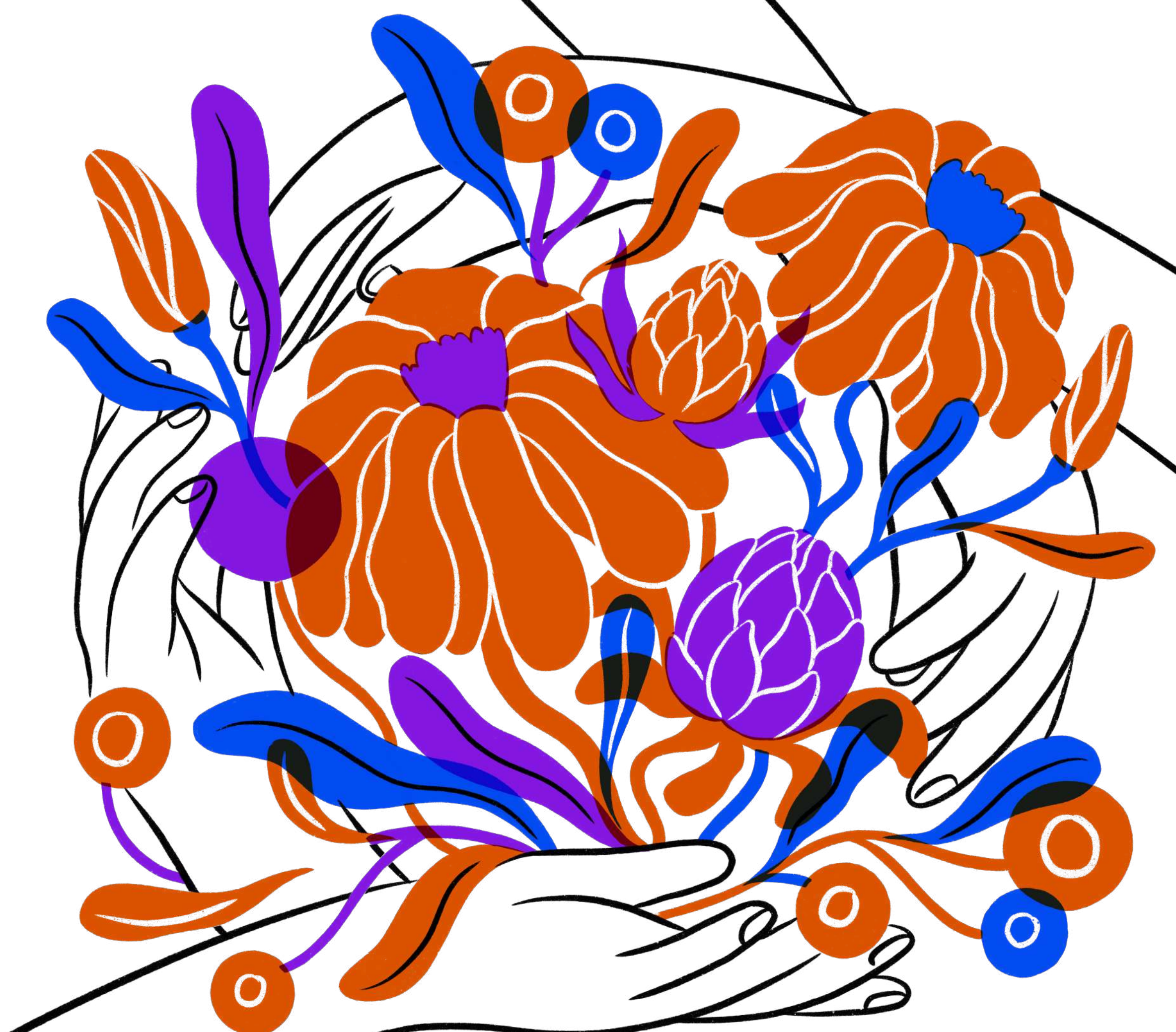
“Farmers have the power and make the decisions. We have to focus on keeping power in the communities.”

Civil society, South Africa

No democracy without women

Women must have a seat at the decision-making table in a democratic society. Women’s representation is critical in government, unions, business, and civil society, as well as in male-dominated sectors, where national policy on Just Transition is shaped.

Both women and men are conditioned in patriarchal systems, and Just Transition entails increasing women’s awareness and confidence so that they may better assert their rights and a fair share of power.



ALLIANCES:
ORGANISING FOR
A JUST TRANSITION

Turning the Titanic: Advocacy and activism for a Just Transition

To succeed, activism for social change involves a wide range of participants at different stages. Different spaces for demands complement each other—from protests and marches, to formal organisational engagement, to public awareness raising.

We heard accounts of campaigns that had succeeded in changing people’s local and even national circumstances. These usually involved a large and inclusive group, rallying around a clear demand. Better fishing rights, access to local development finance and public transportation laws are just a few examples.

These success stories are encouraging, but even small, local impact requires patience and persistence; and large-scale global or regional movements take time and encounter numerous hurdles and setbacks.

Although efforts are being made, the movement for a Just Transition in much of the Global South remains weak and fragmented, with no clear unified purpose.

“In so-called consultations with government, we are politely allowed to speak, and then ignored when policy is formulated, investments agreed and infrastructure planned.”

Civil society, South Africa

Broad crises need broad alliances

Today’s challenges are monumental and intertwined. Alliances or other types of networks need to be formed around a strong and clear common cause. This is usually to demand (or resist) change for better conditions for the majority, the poor, workers and people who are being affected by social injustices.

The most effective campaigns are those that offer solutions, rather than “asserting principles, without dealing with concrete realities”. Reaching agreement on these solutions necessitates a thorough grasp of the challenges from various perspectives. It requires a coordinated effort from all sectors, communities, geographic regions and movements. If campaigns are to work, inclusive forms of cooperation are required to guarantee that demands are properly formulated to reflect the needs of society as a whole, not just a select few.

“Big demands require a wide range of communities to organise. ... Without organised communities, we cannot gain support. Without an organised group, we can’t have access to those who are most affected.”

Civil society, Philippines

The need for unity in diversity

Diversity is both the greatest strength and the challenge of alliances and movements. Partners have different strengths and spheres of influence. They each have their own set of connections, abilities and information. Members of effective coalitions might be as varied as women’s groups, migrant’s groups, farmer or transport workers’ cooperatives, indigenous people’s movements, fisherfolk, youth, activists and political leaders. By its very nature, however, diversity is difficult.

“Alliance-building takes perseverance and patience in diverse cultures. There are many very fragmented organisations. People might want to belong to an alliance but are afraid of weakening their own organisation. It takes time to explain why to build an alliance. Then we identify the issues that affect all the organisations and most agree to demand a single solution from the government for a certain issue.”

Civil society, Philippines

The ideologies of trade unions and civil society may differ. The priorities of northern and southern movements may differ. Within civil society, the green movement and the Just Transition movement disagree on the pace and processes for change.

“Although we have always worked well with civil society and community organisations, the difference in ideologies plays a huge role in this contested issue of a Just Transition. The trade union organisation heavily believes in socialism—that workers must own the means of production—and believes that the State has a significant role to play, especially when it comes to renewable energy generation. We found a rift with the renewable energy Independent Power Producer programme. The civil society organisations love it, whereas we felt that privatisation of the renewable energy sector was a problem.”

COSATU, South Africa

These discrepancies hinder the Just Transition movement and may have left the door open for the all-too-eager corporate sector to influence national and global policy decisions.





DECENT JOBS IN A
GREEN ECONOMY

Reluctant unions and mistrust of a Just Transition

Unions have democratic decision-making systems in place to ensure that their members are represented. Their responsibility in a Just Transition is to ensure the well-being of the workers in the industries and workplaces they represent.

Job losses are catastrophic in the Global South, particularly in countries with high levels of unemployment and poverty. Although unions accept that job losses are unavoidable, they are sceptical that the change will be fair to workers. **They doubt that the promise of ‘new green jobs’ will be achieved, and that these jobs will be of the quality, stability and quantity of those being lost.**

“The context that raises the biggest flags is the mining sector. It is difficult to see a win where the whole community’s livelihood depends on mining or coal-fired power stations. How do you create a patch of green politics for the people who are most faced by the injustice of transitions?”

Political party, Philippines

“There is pressure [on unions] to articulate progressive positions on the issue, but I don’t know how to deal with the tension of jobs. I am being told a narrative of change—but I see nothing to show how we can take care of jobs. That for me is the biggest tension.”

Union support, South Africa

New green jobs or precarious exploitation?

Precarious employment, with inadequate workers’ rights or education, poor health and safety standards, low-paid and dangerous work, and workers’ dependency on these jobs for survival, are a common feature of new and rising sectors in the Global South, particularly in the mining industry. Many of the work environments are significantly harsher than those found in well-established sectors.

“To move from coal to renewable energy you need minerals. That means more mining of critical minerals, and also much more recovery and recycling of minerals. Right now, the jobs, especially in the recycling and recovery of minerals, are terrible. They’re informal, dangerous and poorly paid. And so you would want to focus on organising, and trying to affect flows of capital around the sector, and getting policy in place in different countries, both North and South ... in the constant collective fight to make all jobs good.”

Union, International

Owning the means of production

Unions are concerned that new and privatised sectors will replace unionised industries, resulting in the loss of the progress achieved for decent jobs over decades of union struggle.

One idea is to strengthen workers’ cooperatives. Another has been to ensure that smaller local businesses can engage at the municipal level. Local and worker-centric competition is required against huge, well-funded multinational firms that are already investing in local energy and renewables, and against which smaller operations cannot compete without some form of government protection.



New “green” jobs—but are they decent? Filipino workers recycling plastic in San Fernando face exposure to chemicals.



GLOBAL
SOLIDARITY FOR
A SOUTHERN
JUST TRANSITION

Global linking and influence

Unions are at the heart of Just Transition, working with governments and employers on a local, regional and global scale. **Global Union Federations**, which represent hundreds of millions of workers around the world, are important networking sites for North-South issues concerning Just Transition. Their national and local union affiliates are well-positioned to engage governments and corporations, as well as to keep workers informed and included.

Major international NGOs are also active in the drive for a Just Transition, especially those which support labour or have a lead role in defining a just response to the climate crisis. They use their position, credibility and connections to help and influence governments in both the North and South. They have the ability to build bridges for southern movement partners. Their appetite to learn from and be guided by southern voices helps to ensure that they are relevant and constructive.

Embassies in the Global North and South are designed to connect governments internationally. They should be well-informed and capable of advocating for the Global South’s Just Transition agenda. The Just Transition movements could support embassies to fulfil this role far better.

Financing Just Transition

Green funding flows to the South are slow—a fraction of agreed commitments. While the climate emergency is acknowledged as a global crisis, far more is being invested in the Global North than in the South to ensure an effective climate response, as well as safety nets for workers and affected communities.

Green financing appears to go straight to governments and private players, and not always with the requirement that it must be utilised in ways that are consistent with the ideals of a Just Transition. Local actors and civil society have little or no knowledge of how money from global programmes like the Green Climate Fund can be accessed.

Northern allies in solidarity have a role in ensuring that funds do reach the Global South and do contribute to a Just Transition. Funding should go both to national governments to support economies through the crisis and also, in small and flexible flows, to locally designed, led and implemented initiatives to build from the ground up.



A call for climate justice at Shell headquarters in Manila. Joanna Sustento leaves a photo of her nephew lost during typhoon Haiyan.
© Geric Cruz / Greenpeace

Global legislation for Just Transition

Global laws and United Nations conventions that are ratified by countries can create a clear demand for national compliance to standards. The existing **ILO standards on Occupational Health and Safety**, both for workers and for environmental protection, as well as the **Sustainable Development Goals**, are examples of legislation that demand social and environmental justice.

Progress is being made toward legislation that holds businesses accountable for their

environmental and social impact, with unions also realising that the worst kinds of worker and environmental exploitation are frequently interwoven. These initiatives include, for example, a global law against **ecocide** being promoted in the International Criminal Court, and a campaign in the European Union Commission to ensure **human rights and environmental due diligence**. These laws, while admirable, cannot be designed just for the benefit of northern interests. They must also be negotiated with the southern supply chain and constructed in such a way that workers in affected industries are protected while employers are held accountable for their role in the climate response.

Recommendations: Our action

1 Global solidarity in advocacy

Progressive northern allies, in partnership with their southern counterparts, to use their influence. Some key demands include:

- Address carbon inequality through faster transition in the North;
- Demand that the emitting North recognises and pays for loss and damage in the South;
- Educate the Global North on southern realities;
- Confront capitalist co-option of green transitions;
- Amplify women’s needs and voices, including the most marginalised;
- Demand universal social protection and the right for workers to organise.

2 Create alliances for national Just Transitions

- Work together to inform and demand strategies for a southern Just Transition from governments, in both the Global North and South;
- Support, lead and facilitate inclusive movement building;
- Innovate for green, appropriate and widely accessible technology in the Global South.

3 Build local agency in Global South communities

- At local level—facilitate social democracy, eco-socialism and Just Transition movements;
- Taking the local to scale—support multiple local Just Green Centres.

4 Expand the reach of trade unionism

- More inclusive union organising, mobilising and alliance building;
- Support worker organising in new green sectors.

5 Develop capacity for Just Transition

- Provide training for community leaders and members, unions, civil society and politicians for Just Transition;
- Provide accessible information and materials;
- Support local facilitators for ongoing community engagement at local level;
- Enable learning through dialogue and peer-to-peer exchange.

To read the recommendations in more detail, see the full version of this study.



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Conclusion

This study has taken us from the daunting notion that an entirely different global economy is essential to address the climate and ecological crisis, to the intricacies of how civil society, labour unions and activists may deal with various concerns on a local level.

We hope that the study might help to connect the already strong and very well-formed views of the crisis of global capitalism with the need to give space and energy to grassroots efforts to respond. It might encourage trade union movements to engage more closely with their wider communities, fostering solidarity with and around workers in this difficult time of great opportunity. It might open civil society to the complexity of the space in which people make choices and decisions.

A Just Transition offers a rallying point through which we could bring together the many voices that need to be heard and represented if we want to demand social, economic and environmental justice.

Resources

<https://www.solidar.org/en/pillars/delivering-a-just-transition>

<https://www.palmecenter.se/resourcecenter/just-transition/>





Our future is shared and we must shape it together

The ongoing environmental and climate breakdown threatens our existence and all future development. We must all work together to enter a safer path for humanity.

The urgent transformation of our economies that is now necessary must also be just. This is what we call a Just Transition—addressing the intertwined crises of inequality and planetary destruction at the same time. Just Transition is a call to action, urging civil society, trade unions and progressive political parties to unite in the fight for people and planet.

This study looks at what is needed to achieve a Just Transition for countries in the Global South. It collects insights from people actively working for this fair green shift, focussing on the Philippines and South Africa. What works? What are the challenges? How can this movement be strengthened, and how can international cooperation contribute to that?

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