



United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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EVENT BRIEF

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Cities in Transition

LOCAL STRUGGLES FOR A JUST TRANSITION AND THEIR POTENTIAL TO ADVANCE CLIMATE JUSTICE

Effectively tackling climate change and setting the world on a sustainable, low-carbon development path is the greatest challenge the world is now facing. While commitments made by countries in the international arena to mitigate climate change are being weakened or even reversed in some places, they are being reinforced in others. At the local level, particularly in cities, concrete initiatives are being taken to fill gaps in both vision and action. These climate change mitigation policies and programmes have unique opportunities as well as challenges when it comes to incorporating just transition—the idea that justice and equity must form an integral part of the transition toward a low-carbon world. To what extent do approaches to climate change mitigation at the local level—and in cities in particular—incorporate social justice and equity concerns alongside the environmental agenda? Where they do so, is there potential for city-level just transitions to influence higher level policy change and climate justice?

UNRISD and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung convened a workshop on 14–15 June 2019 in Berlin to kick off Phase II of work by the Just Transition Research Collaborative (JTRC). The event brought together a group of experts in just transition and cities/urban sustainability research to present diverse case studies from both the global North and South, and discuss the challenges and opportunities of implementing just transitions in urban areas. JTRC Phase II will culminate in a report on Cities in Transition that will be launched in December 2019.

A focus on just transition at the local level makes sense...

The current mainstream just transition narrative at the international level focuses on job security and green jobs—which perhaps is unsurprising, as just transition grew out of the labour movement in the United States. But in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development there are strong arguments for a broader framing that includes justice across class, gender, ethnicity, caste, etc., and for the relevance of just transition for both developed and developing countries alike. In other words, a wide definition of just transition is necessary to incorporate the variety of ways low-carbon development can impact social inequalities. The 2018 JTRC report, [Mapping Just Transition\(s\) to a Low-Carbon World](#), demonstrated that many progressive approaches to just transition are actually found at the local level. By exploring what just transition, or lack thereof, looks like in different local contexts, the present research aims to shed light on policies and practices that work, and identify the conditions under which they could be scaled up to higher levels of governance and inform more ambitious and just climate change mitigation policies.

The workshop presentations shed light on a variety of just—and unjust—transition examples and pointed to the need to take the specific context into account when assessing transitions. Climate change mitigation policies, for example, may reduce or increase existing inequalities. But policies can be made less unequal through conscious effort, careful planning and multistakeholder engagement. To achieve this, strategic thinking, inclusive design and implementation, a pro-poor approach, and government support are essential (Sanna Markkanen).

Transformative just transition in cities can derive from advocacy by grassroots organizations and social movements for local policies that lower emissions and combat inequality. One

such example is New York City, USA. The New York case study showcased the power of political activism, coalition building, and using national policy trends to push for local-level just transition. A coalition of housing and environmental activist groups pressured politicians not to accept donations derived from real estate or coal revenues. The coalition also reframed an initiative to protect tenants in rent-regulated housing from bearing the cost of energy efficiency upgrades as a local Green New Deal, which was championed by City Council Speaker Cory Johnson (Aaron Eisenberg). International and national urgency around climate change allowed local activists to reframe environmental and social proposals within a “just transition” narrative.

...But there are impediments to a just transition

Community consultation that can (in the best cases) feed grassroots perspectives and priorities into decisions and policies for a just transition takes time, but climate action is urgent. Local just transition initiatives may offer more opportunities for people’s participation, consultation and inclusion than processes at higher levels of governance. Yet the urgency of mitigating climate change can sometimes

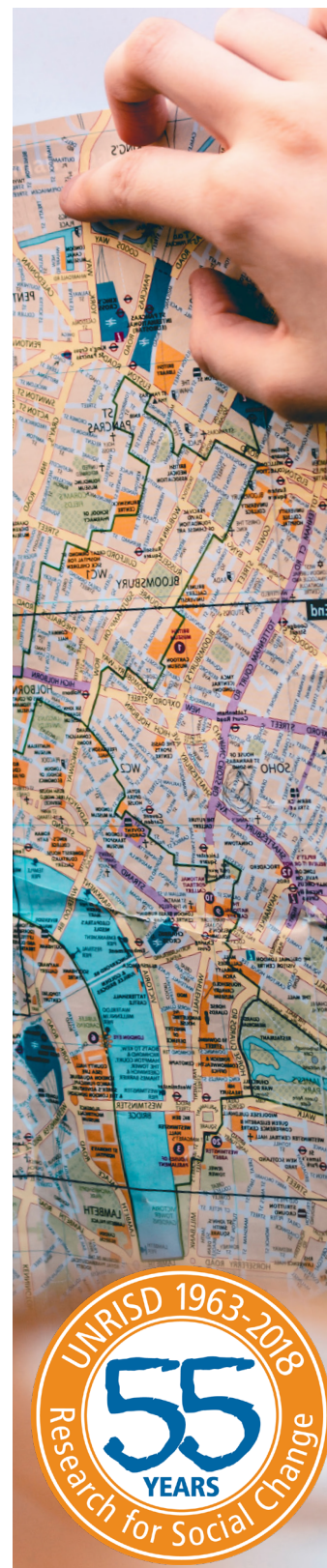
Cities in Transition—Urban Struggles for Just Transition(s)

JUST TRANSITION RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE (PHASE II)

This project analyses urban approaches to just transition, exploring the role of cities in implementing progressive and transformative just transition strategies and plans. Building on the theoretical framework and assessment carried out by the Just Transition Research Collaborative and published in the report [Mapping Just Transition\(s\) to a Low-Carbon World](#) (2018), the project collects new empirical evidence and stories from several cities, and fosters exchange of experience and mutual learning on the role of cities in just transition. The research contributes a better understanding of the potential of city-level just transition policies and frameworks to influence higher level policy change and climate justice.

The project is funded by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung with support from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

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override community involvement. Communities must also have a certain level of organization, technical knowledge, skills and time to participate in policy debates and processes.

• **Boulder, USA:** The case study of Boulder demonstrates that while affluent cities may have ambitious mitigation targets, many policy impacts fall more heavily on low-income and minority groups. For example, a decision to increase fuel prices (to discourage the use of fossil fuels and lower carbon emissions) disproportionately affected landscaping businesses that employed predominantly lower income, minority workers. But these socio-economic groups were not sufficiently consulted in advance, and the inequitable social impacts were not foreseen. To change this, a programme to prepare community-level climate justice leaders for negotiations with policy makers was put in place. It was effective in putting just transition in the local climate change action plan, although specific targets have not yet been included (David Ciplet).

• **Scotland and Luxembourg:** The challenges of community-operated mitigation programmes were shown by examples from the Scottish Climate Challenge Fund and the Luxembourg Pacte Climat, which required carbon accounting from community groups that received funding. However, this requirement necessitated well-honed financial and reporting skills, which in turn prevented equitable and just participation of all community members in these funding opportunities. It also limited the type of projects that were undertaken. Instead of pursuing their identified mitigation priorities, some communities ended up focusing on side activities that could be more easily accounted for, distracting from their organization's original aim (Gerald Aiken).

Many developing countries question the premise of a just transition, noting that there cannot be an energy transition, for example, for a nation that still lacks universal energy access. In such contexts, "just development" and "equitable access" may be clearer expressions of the principles of just transition. While efforts to cut carbon emissions in developed cities are geared towards using renewable energy sources, retrofitting buildings, and changing modes of transportation, in developing countries mitigation policies must also include attention to energy access and the forestry sector. As such, a just transition between rural and urban localities is central to equitable development.

• **Manila, Philippines:** One case study compared the Antique coal mine and a solar farm in Calatagan to demonstrate that working conditions are not necessarily more just in the renewable energy sector—specific attention is required to make them so. In both the coal mine and solar farm, workers did not receive adequate wages and social protection from their employers. A shift to low-carbon economy, then, does not automatically imply respect for or higher labour standards—but

a just transition narrative can help make the case for upholding standards in clean energy production (Avril De Torres).

• **India:** Just transition in India can also largely be framed as just access to (clean) energy. Energy access is expanding, but city homes use as much each day as rural communities do in a year, and the electricity needs of both rural and urban poor people are not being met. A decentralized energy system in India combined with a variety of uncoordinated interventions by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has led to an unjust energy landscape. For example, rural households are given solar-power lamps by NGOs when they actually want electricity to charge their phones. The level and type of energy access depends entirely on a community's connections to NGOs or government officials. By politicizing energy access, claiming their rights and seeking to hold political decision-makers accountable, however, communities have found ways to formulate demands for both clean energy as well as access to it that is centralized, equitable and just (Ankit Kumar).

• **Pangani, Tanzania:** The case study of emerging cities—secondary towns with rural nonfarm economies—in Tanzania threw up differences between national and local priorities. In this case of "just development" in Pangani, local communities prioritized livelihoods and the sustainable use of mangrove resources, whereas national policy aimed to maximize the protection and conservation of mangroves for their role as carbon sinks. This case demonstrates that climate change mitigation needs to incorporate local development priorities and strategies to ensure a just approach and inclusivity between national and local governance. One way local interests can inform national mitigation strategies is through adoption of a just transition framework by climate finance institutions such as the Green Climate Fund or the Global Environment Facility. Then, national governments would have a greater incentive to ensure just development outcomes while lowering carbon emissions (Jessica Omukuti).

Conclusion

The case studies raised many of the opportunities as well as the challenges for climate change mitigation policies and programmes at the local level to ensure a just transition to a low-carbon development path. Multistakeholder engagement, participatory political processes, compliance with labour standards, as well as equitable access to energy and natural resources, and redressing rural-urban disparities, are all essential—and often difficult to achieve. With weakening commitment to climate action at the national level in some places undermining international progress, cities take center stage in the global low-carbon transition. Promoting just transition approaches that are transformative and progressive at the local level will be a crucial path towards greater equity and climate justice.

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This brief was prepared by Shannon Johnson and Dunja Krause. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of UNRISD. Photo by Alexandre Debiève on Unsplash.

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