

Just Transitions: A Concept Note

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This document aims to introduce 'Just Transitions' as a concept and an approach aimed to ensure the deployment of actions to decarbonise cities can simultaneously create social and economic value, and steer to more fair and equitable structures and practices in cities.

What is a Just Transition? [Slides deck: [JT Overview](#)]

A just transition is an approach for a strategic, planned, and balanced process to ensure that a Cities' journeys to decarbonisation are also ones that shifts us away from practices that are harmful to people and ecosystems and towards models that are more sustainable, fair and equitable for all, especially for those who are most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change as well and of the social and economic shifts brought about by the transition.

A comprehensive multi-faceted concept

A 'just transition' is not a new concept. It emerged in the 1970's from the labour movements, and have since been expanded by labour unions allying with environmental and climate justice groups in global environmental negotiations. In the last decade, it regained momentum in the context of the global efforts to cut carbon emissions to address climate change. In this context, one of the most influential formulations comes from the *International Labour Organisation (2016)* [\[1\]](#) focused on equitable and inclusive opportunities for workers and communities through the transition of carbon-intensive industries. This approach importantly informed the European Green Deal (2020) and associated Just Transition policies, such as the *Just Transition Mechanism* [\[2\]](#) for regions heavily reliant on carbon-intensive industries.

As Cities accelerate their efforts to decarbonise urban systems, changes in the ways of living, commuting or consuming will also have varying impacts on different groups. Interventions in housing, mobility or energy are inevitably tied to issues of equity, like affordability, accessibility or inclusion, which need to be considered in designing policies and implementing pilots. However, the transition does not only carry risks—they also present significant opportunities for communities, in the form of improved living conditions, new jobs or business and market opportunities. A just transition approach, different to concepts like 'sustainability' or 'inclusion', is concerned with how costs and benefits are equitable shared.

Moreover, in cities, the politics of transition intersect with broader urban development issues, making a just transition a politically sensitive and often contentious concept. Environmental and climate justice groups, for instance, advocate for a transition that is comprehensive—not only mitigating the direct impacts on workers and dependent communities, but also addressing entrenched disparities that are especially pronounced in urban areas. These disparities are further amplified by the disproportionate effects of climate change and environmental burdens on disadvantaged groups. As cities implement projects to decarbonise urban infrastructure and services, and to enhance climate resilience, demands from urban social justice movements—such as the right to the city, housing justice, or gender-inclusive public spaces and transportation—become integral parts of a just transition.

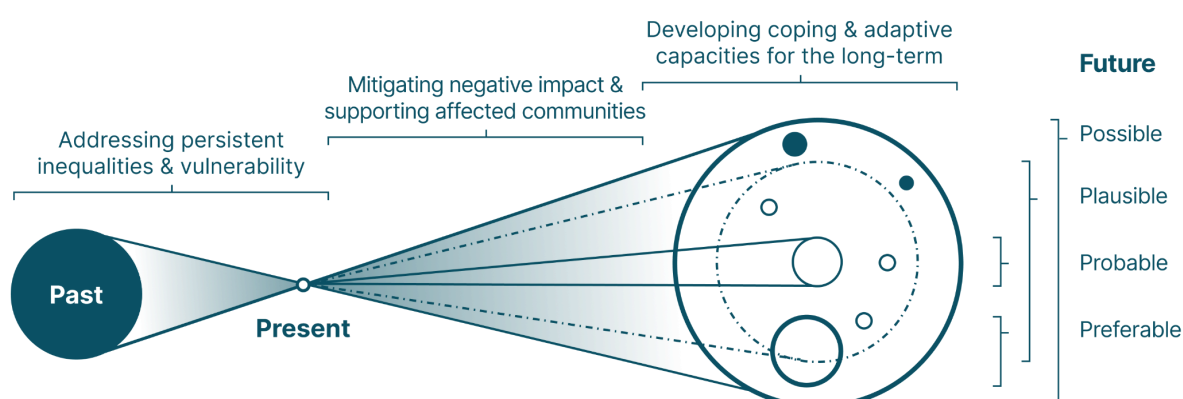
Transition challenges, risks and opportunities

Current state: Existing inequalities and burdens	Current impacts of climate change	Impact of recurring or acute weather events on people (e.g. flooding, heatwaves, cyclones, landslides, wildfires)
	Environmental burdens	Environmental conditions that threaten adequate living standards (e.g. pollution, air quality, safety, public space and green areas)
	Socio economic burdens	Socioeconomic disparities, especially those caused or exacerbated by climate and environmental burden (e.g. energy and material poverty, gentrification)
Forward looking: Climate risks and opportunities	Physical risks	Disruptions by acute or chronic incremental risks (e.g. sea level rise)
	Transition risks	Impacts due to changes in policy and broader landscape shifts (e.g. layoffs, displacement, economic shocks, skills obsolescence)
	Emerging opportunities	From new markets, resources deployed, infrastructure or capacities built for climate action (e.g. energy self-generation, housing, green areas, business opportunities, employment, training, knowledge).

Just Transition objectives

In a simplified manner, a just transition can be organised around three main 'objectives':

1. Recognising the persistent disparities in our current systems, a just transition seeks to leverage the deployment of actions and emerging opportunities to address these disparities and prevent them from being exacerbated through the transition or replicated in new systems.
2. Acknowledging that the transition will have unequal impacts on different groups, and that some will need additional support to cope with change, a just transition is aimed to support those most affected, thus preventing the creation of new forms of inequality.
3. To ensure that opportunities are accessible to all in the long term, it is essential to strengthen the capacities of communities to cope with, adapt to, and seize future opportunities, thereby enabling them to reap the benefits of the transition by their own agency, as co-producers of the climate-neutral future and active agents of change.



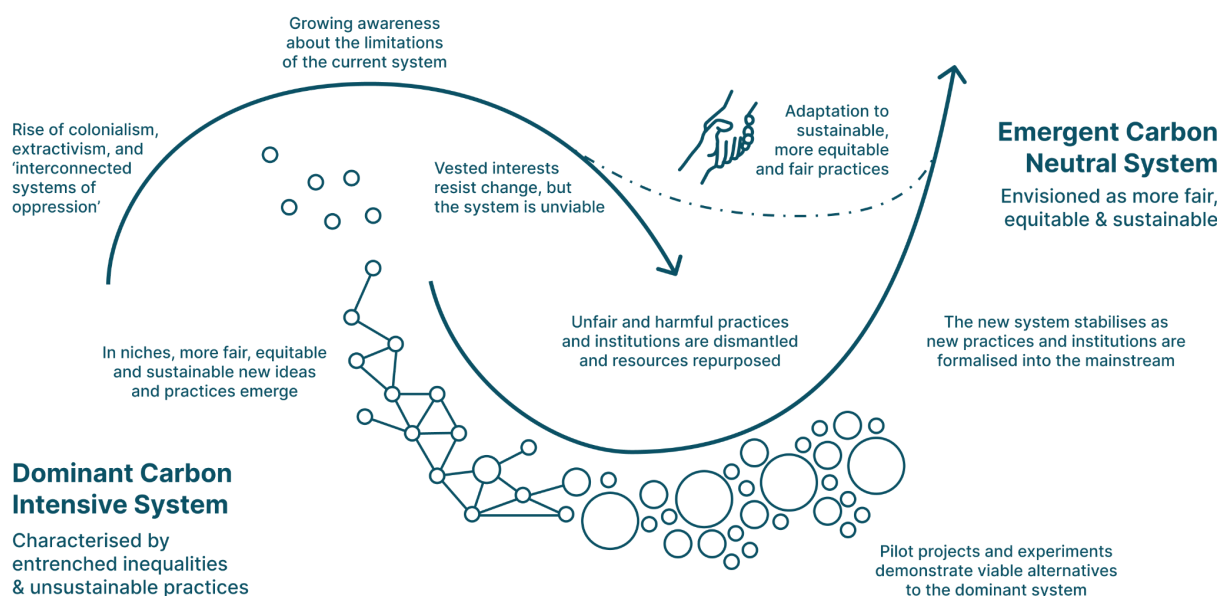
Justice Framework

There is no single right and simple way to approach the concept of justice. Justice is a complex and highly contextual concept evolving with history and culture. In the context of transitions, scholars often refer to a set of 'principles'

Justice as recognition	Procedural justice
It entails acknowledging the impact that climate change and the deployment of actions have on segments of the community, now and for future generations, and asks 'Who is affected, and who should be involved?'. It also involves valuing the diverse needs, experiences, capacities, and knowledge of individuals and groups.	It requires that everyone, including the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, can meaningfully participate in shaping the decisions that could affect them, guaranteeing a process that is inclusive, accessible, and equitable. It asks 'Who should be involved so that everyone's voice/contribution is both heard and understood/ considered/valued?'
Distributive justice	Restorative justice
It is concerned with the distribution of costs and benefits, ensuring that vulnerable groups are not disproportionately burdened by deployed actions, and that all segments of the community can equitably seize opportunities and benefit from the transition. It asks 'Who benefits and who carries the costs? Are these distributed fairly?'	It aims to repair harm, and restore the feeling of 'injustice' that results from loss and grief. It is often associated with compensation, reparative action, but also with restoring relationships that may have been harmed. It asks 'How do we rectify past injustice, restore and possibly compensate for harm done?'

A systems change perspective

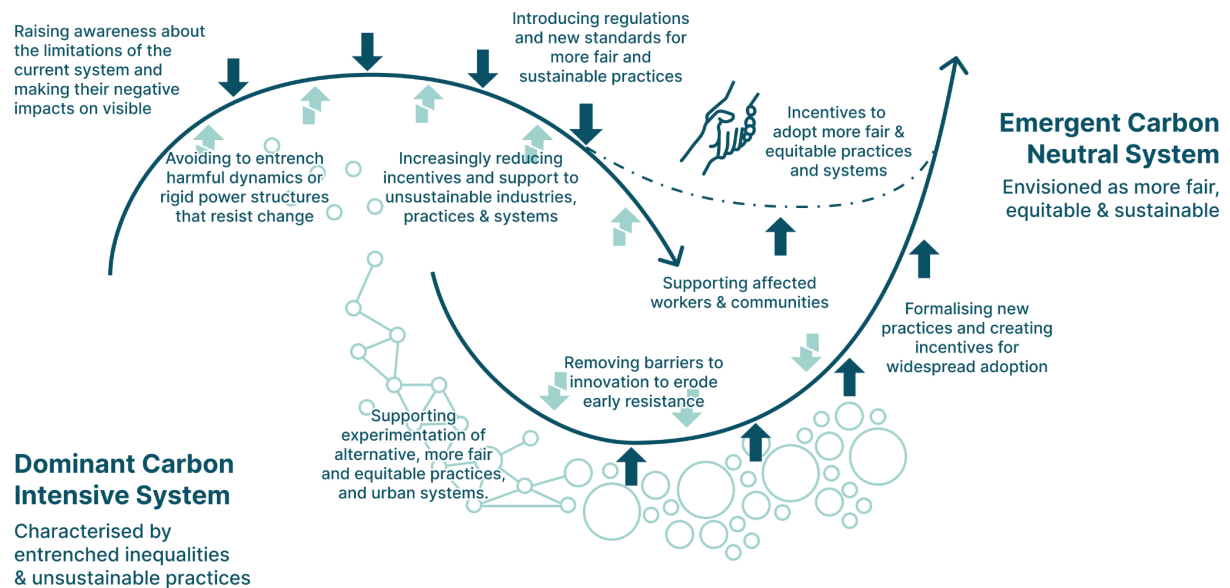
From a system perspective [4], transitions are often defined as the building of a new status quo within a system by destabilising, breaking down and phasing out dominant structures, beliefs, and practices, all of which involve inherent power and political dimensions. A just transition approach is deeply concerned with these power and political struggles, and its consequent distributive impacts. From this perspective, a just transition is not merely about managing change dynamics in a fair way; it is fundamentally about dismantling the structures, beliefs, and practices that create and perpetuate inequalities and replacing them with new practices and institutions that more equitably distribute social benefits.



Based on Berkana Institute's Two-Loops Model

What can City Administrations do?

City administrations play a crucial role in enabling a just transition. Through policy—broadly encompassing diverse regulatory, financial, and convening instruments through the policy cycle—city administrations wield a powerful lever to shape how transitions unfold and proactively guide development. Policy decisions, or the absence thereof, can inadvertently sustain or exacerbate unsustainable and unfair practices. However, they also have the potential to discourage such practices and structures, creating the conditions for more sustainable, equitable, and fair systems to emerge.



Moving Forward with Just Transition

As cities accelerate their efforts towards decarbonisation, a Just Transition becomes increasingly urgent. The challenges are significant, but so are the opportunities for creating urban environments that are more inclusive, fair, and resilient. The actions taken today will shape the future of our cities, ensuring that the transition is not only environmentally sustainable but also equitable. Moving forward, effective governance, thoughtful policy design, and inclusive delivery will be crucial to ensuring that the transition delivers lasting, equitable outcomes.