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Politicising the Just Transition: Linking global climate policy, Nationally Determined Contributions and targeted research agendas

Abstract

During the 2018 COP24 meeting in Poland, the Just Transition received particular emphasis, with the adoption of the “Solidarity and Just Transitions Silesia Declaration”. It represented commitments to take seriously the impact of climate change and climate change policy on workers and surrounding communities. To date, however, UNFCCC historical contexts and commitments have rarely been recognised in the academic literature. This paper reviews the link of the Just Transition to UNFCCC processes and labour unions before critically considering the current academic treatment of the agenda and in particular, the under emphasis of Nationally Determined Contributions. It then presents a series of research recommendations centred on a concern for how best to use this political background to leverage tangible impact.

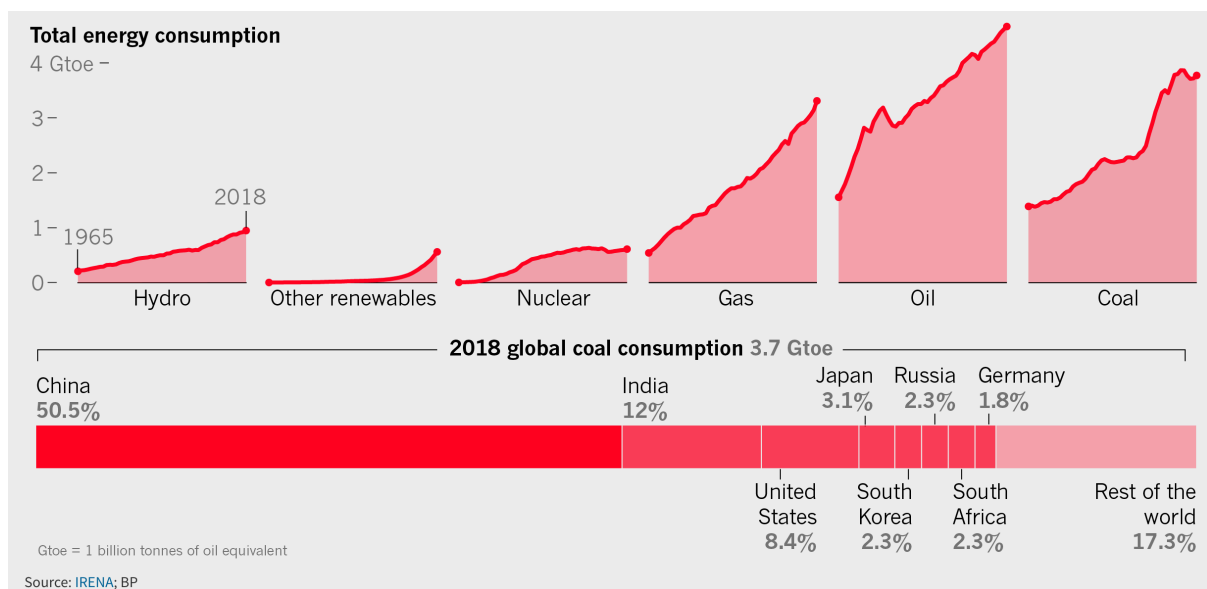
Key Words

Just transition; UNFCCC; Silesia Declaration; political geography

Introduction

Globally, there is an ever-increasing drive towards the permeation of renewable energy technologies, accompanied by efforts to phase out of fossil fuels. Although this trend has some exceptions, positively it reflects an ambition—albeit arguably a slow-paced one in some instances, particularly given increased energy consumption across the board (Figure 1)—to transform our energy systems in response to climate challenges. Yet it also comes with a real human cost, particularly for the fossil fuel labour force and their surrounding communities, who may face job losses amidst declining sectors, as well as challenges to adapt, reskill or transform as new renewable technology sectors emerge (Silveria and Pritchard, 2016). Within global climate policy architecture, discussed as early as the 2010 16th Conference of the Parties (COP) meeting in Cancun (UNFCCC, 2011), the Just Transition agenda seeks to address these concerns.

Figure 1: Total global energy consumption remains dominated by fossil fuels

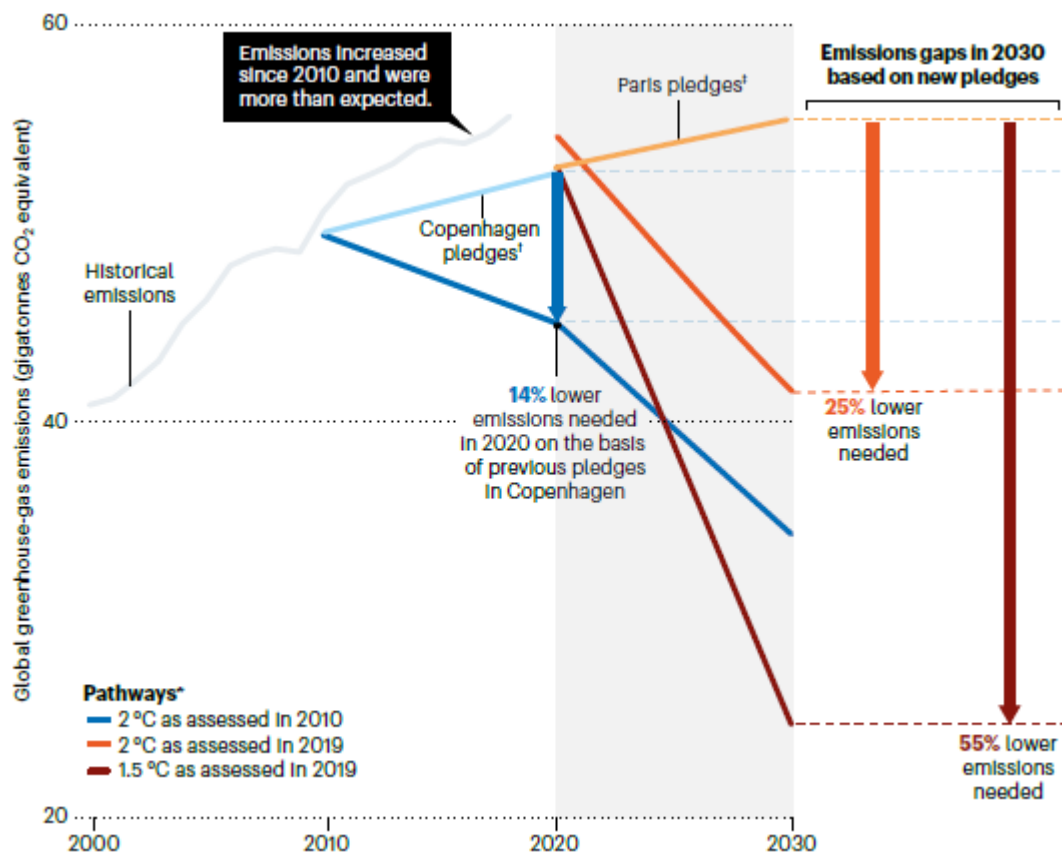


(Reproduced from Tollefson, 2019)

As it is framed at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) level, the notion of a Just Transition requires that we take into account the rights of the workforce and throughout a period of unprecedented change, encourage the creation of decent work and quality jobs in sustainable economic sectors in accordance with nationally defined development priorities (UNFCCC, 2016a). It also sets out that the burden of climate action should not be borne unequally by one set of workers or communities or any one country, encapsulating a very geographical perspective on who is affected and where (Jenkins, 2019).

During the 2018 COP24 meeting in Katowice, Poland, the concept received particular emphasis, becoming a central feature of many discussions. The milestone adoption of the “Solidarity and Just Transitions Silesia Declaration” in the same meeting represented a commitment from Heads of State and Government to take seriously the impact of climate change and climate change policy on workers and surrounding communities.

To date, however, this UNFCCC-level historical context and commitment has rarely been recognised in academic literature, which instead, seems detached from the political systems currently operating for the Just Transition’s enactment. Through this detachment, academia is therefore neglecting opportunities to influence the agenda’s development. At the same time, the underlying rationale behind a Just Transition—that the world needs to rapidly transform to low-carbon energy sources but balance this concern with an appreciation for equity and fairness for those whose livelihoods may be disrupted—has only become more poignant (Höhne et al., 2020). Insufficient climate action during the past decade—with emissions actually increasing in Brazil and Indonesia and remaining unchanged in China, Russia and the United States—means that truly transformational development pathways are now required to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 2030 (see Figure 2) (Höhne et al., 2020). The amount invested in global climate action is also far short of what is needed; an estimated \$455 billion was invested last year in climate efforts (broadly defined), but at least \$2.4 trillion per year is needed to avert climate catastrophe (Yeo, 2019).

Figure 2: Global climate action is insufficiently reducing greenhouse gas emissions

(Reproduced from Höhne et al., 2020)

Considering these twin goals of global decarbonisation and climate and energy justice, this paper begins by reviewing the link of the Just Transition to UNFCCC processes and labour unions. It then critically considers the current academic treatment of the Just Transition agenda and in particular, the lack of discussion given to the role of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). In a first attempt to fill this critical gap, the review goes on to presents a series of academic research recommendations centred on a concern for how best to use this political background to leverage tangible impact.

The Just Transition within UNFCCC Processes

The Just Transition has a political history longer than acknowledged. Emergent in the early 1980s, it reportedly stems from the United States (US) trade union movement in response to regulations to prevent air and water pollution and the resultant move to close down some industries (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Healy and Barry, 2017). In the years that followed, it has become central to the global union movement as concerned groups vie over what may be considered an “environment vs. jobs” tussle across sectors, particularly through collaborations

between the International Trade Union Confederation, The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) (Stavis and Felli, 2015; Burrows, 2001; Goodard and Farrelly, 2018). It has also filtered into national union movements and the remit of environmental non-governmental organisations (Goods, 2013; Roberts and Parks, 2007; Goodard and Farrelly, 2018).

Following years of growth in the scope of its application, the Just Transition secured considerable interest as it featured in the preambles of the Paris Agreement, where it reads: “taking into account the imperative of a Just Transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities” (UNFCCC, 2016b: 2). Yet it received its most substantial mandate Decision 11 of the COP21 in 2015, where the “Just Transition of the workforce, and the creation of decent work and quality jobs” was adopted as a key area within the work programme. It has also received support through the Working Group on Just Transitions and Decent Work (WG on JT & DW), part of the Marrakech Partnership Global Climate Action, which exists with the mandate to share good practice and case studies of the real-world implementation of the Paris Agreement, whilst also promoting green jobs that are good for people, good for the environment and good for the economy.

The ILO—a UN organisation that includes representation from trade unions and employers—is a leading player in the continuation of the Just Transition agenda too. The ILO is listed as a core organization in the implementation of the Just Transition in the Silesia Declaration itself¹ and provides secretariat for the WG on JT & DW. Responsible for the adoption of the *Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All* in 2015, it outlines requirements for the international community, recommending amongst other elements, attention to macroeconomic, sectoral and enterprise policies, social protection and skills development.

At COP24 (2018) in Katowice, Poland, the Just Transitions agenda then came under the spotlight again with over 25 side events addressing the theme. Specifically, the Just Transition ambition was reaffirmed and strengthened through the Silesia Declaration, an initiative of the Polish COP Presidency adopted by governments at the COP24. By agreeing the Silesia declaration, countries committed to taking seriously the impact of climate change

¹ Where it reads: “Invite all relevant United Nations agencies, including the International Labour Organization, and the international and regional organizations, observer organizations including social partners as well as other stakeholders and interested Parties to implement this Declaration (Page 3).

and climate change policy on workers and surrounding communities. Alongside the Silesia Declaration, a joint statement of the United Nations Special Procedures Mandate Holders – a group analysing human rights issues – also reinforced the need to incorporate public involvement plans. Nonetheless, whilst there is a formal commitment, the Silesia Declaration remains a high-level document. Indeed, at the UNFCCC level, it is the operationalisation of the Just Transition that presents the most challenging and imperative step. This brings us to two important gaps. First, that in discussing the Just Transition, academia often neglects its close connection to international politics. Second, through this neglect, that academia misses opportunities to inform the uniquely geographical development of this agenda in what is arguably a critical, formative stage.

Just Transitions within academia

The popularity of Just Transition in the academic literature—which we interpret as studies published in leading peer-reviewed journals indexed on Scopus— is experiencing an early surge, yet writing in this area appears largely detached from the UNFCCC process and the policy structures moving to operationalise it in practice. As a critical example, Newell and Mulvaney’s (2013) foundational paper accurately portray the Just Transition’s interest in protecting jobs in vulnerable industries and in creating new and ‘decent’ employment in emerging sectors, yet given the timing of their article, they unavoidably provide an out-dated account of the concepts links to policy. Published in the same year, Swilling et al.’s (2015) account delves into political structures further as they emphasise the role of power relations at the national level in enacting Just Transition proprieties and the imperative of a clear set of policies that could be implemented by a state that embodies the necessary institutional and strategic capacity for such matters. They do not, however, name any organizational groups or structures that might enable this, leaving their reflections somewhat abstract. Goddard and Farrelly (2018) present a just transition management framework and suggest its role in recognising and overcoming political barriers to a Just Transition in the Australian context, but do not extend their thinking to the international, UNFCCC level. As a final but by no means exhaustive example, a recent paper by Pai et al. (2020) considers issues of political resistance only, and not wider political challenges, structures and organisations. This despite a consistent and more concrete focus on the role of labour unions – including contributions by Stevis and Felli (2015), Wiseman et al. (2017), Snell and Fairbrother’s (2013) and Olson (2010).

Yet it is in more recent pieces that the neglect of political processes becomes most concerning, particularly in the wake of the Paris Agreement’s entrenchment of Just Transitions

thinking. As a very selective exemplar, Heffron and McCauley's (2018: 76) *Geoforum* piece explores the notion that Just Transition, environmental, climate and energy justice goals are complementary from a conceptual standpoint, where this can "result in significant increases in public acceptance and understanding". Yet the authors give no mention to the labour union or political origins of the Just Transition agenda, make no statements about the feasibility of their mutual operationalisation, and do not present policy recommendations beyond this conceptual claim. In addition, whilst there are invariably clear links between climate and just transition thinking – with Jacobs et al. (2018: 2) writing that "climate change mitigation can only be successful if it is part of a 'just transition' that fosters human well-being", for example—they do not acknowledge that climate justice is enshrined in the Paris Agreement as its own distinct target (UNFCCC, 2016b). On the whole, this does not reflect the importance of the Just Transition as a political concept; a critique that could undoubtedly be extended to other contributions. Here then, we make a case for intentionally filling this gap.

The Just Transition and Revitalised Nationally Determined Contributions

Beyond a critique that the UNFCCC politics are neglected in academic thought, we make a particular claim that one key set of political apparatus should gain more attention: NDCs. These, under the auspices of the Paris Agreement, represent the national climate plans pledged by states that outline how they will reduce their emissions, adapt to climate change impacts and support other affected nations (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017). Said another way, for signatories of the Paris Agreement, the NDCs set the supervening strategic objectives at a country level. Although sometimes criticised for their limited impact, we argue not only that Just Transition can better engage with the NDCs/UNFCCC, but that in providing another opportunity for leverage, can transform and accelerate the NDCs, giving them greater political currency, social legitimacy, or, auspiciously, both.

Goddard and Farrelly (2018: 112) set out the key principles of the Just Transition to be (1) financial support, (2) transition of workers into green jobs as well as (3) the involvement of unions and communities in a process of proactive industrial planning. We suggest an increased role for the NDCs with recognition that although guided by a set of key principles, the nature of the international labour force and the differential challenges facing countries means that a single approach to the Just Transition is difficult. Thus, in tandem with the UNFCCC level processes, enacting the Just Transition through NDCs and the policy instruments used to implement them can allow for context-specific, politically appropriate solutions.

Of course, the roles of the UNFCCC and the NDCs must be delicately balanced. In many places, Just Transitions work is happening bottom-up, with the affected communities and regions leading transitions discussions; e.g. through the Just Transitions Alliance based in California (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). Where constructive work to implement Just Transition criteria is being undertaken at the NDC level, this should not be disrupted. Concurrently, and given that job markets are intertwined with global dynamics, solely nationally focused approaches are also not feasible. In this regard, it is necessary to link NDC dynamics with global ones. Here, the UNFCCC provides a forum to share experience and analyse impacts. Whilst these interlinking roles represent potential tensions, taken positively and proactively, they also provide room for constructive synergies.

Whilst Just Transition has come to the fore of policy discussions, we must also acknowledge that concerns have emerged over the agenda's potential to slow the ambition of change too – fears arguably represented by the fact that only around 25% of UNFCCC parties adopted the Silesia Declaration. We pre-emptively counter these arguments by suggesting that NDC and Just Transition goals *can* be complementary. The Ghanaian NDC, for instance, focus on job creation in the food and agriculture sector providing paired opportunities for both economic diversification and the Just Transition. Following this example, the Just Transitions can be positioned as an enabling element of socially sound NDC implementation and an important mechanism for securing support.

In this vein, the implementation of the Just Transition necessitates both an upfront assessment of both positive and negative employment impacts and a pledge of measures that will be taken to protect workers, as stated by the Paris Agreement (Rosemberg, 2018). Advocates also suggest that it should remain a permanent theme within the forum on response measures under the Paris Agreement.

Conclusions: A Just Transitions research agenda

We need to re-politicise the Just Transitions concept within academia and to explicitly link conceptual and empirical scholarship to a wider political context. Having made our claim that one way of mobilising such a link is through investigation of the NDC structure, we now present a series of research recommendations centred on a concern for more intentional engagement with this political context. In effect, then, this critical review positions the Just Transition agenda as a call to arms for academic researchers who are responsible for gathering empirical (and where possible quantitative) evidence, and not least because current UNFCCC response measure forums do not currently involve research-gathering exercises.

Specifically, we advise that research studies should further explore the following elements:

- Policy-oriented conceptual frameworks that enable Just Transitions goals to be synergized with other goals, perhaps within multi-criteria decision-making frameworks;
- Concrete examples of both positive and negative transition experiences, including historical analyses that can be fed into NDC comparative studies and UNFCCC decision-making, verifying UNFCCC forum work, and exploring what evidence is currently lacking;
- Detailed, empirically-rich case studies with explicit investigation of the generalizability of, and also limitations and specificity of, political contexts;
- Qualitative reports reflecting perspectives from diverse working groups and community concerns;
- Short and long-term measures for Just Transitions that account for opportunity costs as well as possible temporal trade-offs between now, 2030, 2050, and beyond;
- Cross-country comparisons that include not only Western democratic states but also authoritarian, communist, and other illiberal regimes, especially as many of these (e.g. China, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia) may have the most to lose from decarbonisation;
- Suggestions for UNFCCC guidelines, methodologies, policy structures and evaluation measures;
- Comprehensive research design methodologies within academia to assess inequalities across political contexts.

Critically, research studies should also incorporate political considerations from their inception, ensuring they are developed in such a way that their results can feed directly into both national and international decision-making or at the very least, that they encapsulate the full realities of them.

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