



What is meant by Just transition? Meanings and complexity, beyond the slogan

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The ecological transition is key in the most recent national and European policies, i.e. the Green Deal, the European Commission's plan for the transition to climate-neutral economies. Presented in December 2019, the European Green Deal aims to no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050 and provides the framework within which EU actions and policies for the ecological transition have been planned over the past three years.

In this context, **the energy sector plays a major role, since the achievement of the objectives set by the European strategy largely depends on it**. In this sense, the 'Next Step: Transition' project was planned, dedicated precisely to the transition of the energy industry and to strengthening the skills of trade union organisations in this area.

The initiative – which received co-financing from the European Union – started in August 2022 and, under the leadership of the Italian trade union Femca-Cisl, is led by a partnership formed by ADAPT, the Helex Institut study centre (Germany) and the trade union organisations IG BCE (Germany), ACV-CSC BIE (Belgium), SMF Podkrepa (Bulgaria) and UGT-FICA (Spain), as well as the associated trade unions Flaei-Cisl (Italy), IndustriAll Europe and EPSU (both at EU level).

An initial issue that emerged from research, preliminary to the training actions, concerned the difficulty of framing and defining certain concepts, which have developed in parallel with the growth of public attention to environmental sustainability. **Among many others, the *Just transition* slogan is often cited as a mantra by political and social partner representatives, although there is not always consensus on its meaning.**

In order to clarify the issue, in addition to the major scientific contributions on the subject, together with the Helex study centre, it was asked a number of national and international experts for their opinions, such as Vassil Kirov (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), Paolo Tomassetti (University La Statale of Milan, Italy), Serena Rugiero (Di Vittorio Foundation, Italy), Oscar Molina (Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain), Béla Galgóczi (ETUI, Belgium), Nadja Dörflinger (Federal Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, Germany), Alexander Bendel (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany), Simone Claar (University of Kassel, Germany), Kris Bachus (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium) and Anne Guisset (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium).

What emerged, first of all, is that **the concept of “just transition” has deep roots** back to the 1970s in the United States of America, when **Tony Mazzocchi, a trade unionist of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), noticing the negative impacts of oil, chemical and nuclear companies on the environment and workers' health, began to engage in battles to protect workers and the welfare of local communities.**

In 1997, the Just Transition Alliance was born, consecrating the partnership between the trade union movement and environmental protection associations and groups. Gradually, the term just transition spread all over Europe and became the main trade union contribution to the global debate on environmental sustainability, a contribution that found its institutional recognition starting from the preamble to the **Paris Climate Agreement** of December 2015, which states the need to “take into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs”.

With reference to the meaning of the term, both the literature and the interviewees report a particularly broad meaning, which refers to preventing and counteracting the possible negative consequences of the ecological transition for certain categories of people: workers and vulnerable individuals and communities in the first place. Consequently, the actions associated with the just transition often relate to training for workers and professional reconversion, the construction of social, economic and employment protection networks, and the definition of new policies for development.

Given the breadth of this definition, there are at least **three declinations of the just transition concept** that emerge from the literature review. In particular, the “**job-focused**” approach, which is concerned with the consequences of the environmental transition for workers, promoting containment measures such as the provision of economic support tools and training paths; the “**environment-focused**” approach, which instead emphasises the centrality of environmental justice, supporting the involvement of all citizens in the definition and implementation of environmental policies; and finally, the “**society-focused**” approach, which relates to the ecological transition at the system level and thus supports a radical change of economies and societies on universal values of justice and equity, also through the empowerment and participation of all minorities, including indigenous peoples and LGBTQ communities, in this process.


But over and above the different meanings of the concept of just transition, the difficulty of its definition seems to result, according to some of the experts interviewed, from an **inherent relativity of the concept of “justice”**, which is affected by the subjective perceptions of the people and organisations that gradually employ the term. This subjectivity, **combined with the imbalance of power that still persists among the actors involved in ecological transition**, determines a risk of reaching inherently unbalanced outcomes.

The definition process could be affected by the greater weight of public authorities and companies in shaping the environmental debate, compared to the role that workers and local communities play today. Even the prevailing trade union approach, despite the variety of policies and actions implemented in the different countries, seems to suffer from this imbalance of power, which seems to bring out an idea of justice largely bent on distributive processes and which therefore, just as in the “job-focused” meaning illustrated above, tends to apply to the mere mitigation of the negative effects of ecological transition policies, without materialising in a real intervention of workers and their representatives in the definition of reconversion plans.

Thus oriented, however, **the just transition runs the risk of being limited and partial, since it lacks its pre-distributive declination, i.e., it assumes the concrete participation of workers and**

citizens upstream of ecological transition processes, right from the definition, regulation and implementation. And it is in this direction that, according to some experts, work should be done so that the just transition formula can really unfold its full potential.

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