

PATHWAYS TO A FAST AND JUST ENERGY TRANSITION

INSIGHTS FROM CLEAN ENERGY CASE STUDIES

Overview Synthesis Paper

Abstract

The rapidly intensifying climate crisis is devastating people's lives and the natural world. This overview paper synthesises insights, and draws out recommendations, from various just energy transition pathways (available at [this link](#)) that simultaneously mitigate the climate crisis and help reduce inequality, generate shared prosperity and hence garner public support for the transition. The cases provide illustrative examples of (a) transition policies and projects relating to the switch to renewable energy, the exit from fossil fuels, and the extraction of transition minerals and (b) different community, public, private and co-equity ownership models. While none of the cases fully meet all the identified just energy transition criteria, they offer a positive vision and compelling reasons why governments, donors, multilateral agencies, business and civil society should put justice and rights at the heart of their energy transition policies and projects. The research also reveals some of the structural inequalities and constraints that inhibit both the delivery and scaling of a just energy transition and, hence, the need for increased and higher-quality public climate finance and transformative policy and legal reform at the national and international levels.

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Executive Summary

Humanity's continued use of fossil fuels is intensifying the climate crisis and devastating people's lives and nature across the world. It is a crisis super-charged by extreme inequality in which, as the UN General Secretary succinctly put it, 'the rich cause the problem and the poor pay the price'. Yet while many people still lack access to energy, it is also vital to human flourishing and economic development and powers much of people's lives.

The good news is that the clean energy transition is continuing to gather pace and scale, despite resistance by some fossil fuel incumbents and opponents. Renewable energy is generating positive benefits and improving people's lives across the world including via increased energy access, strengthened energy security, lower and less volatile fuel bills, improved health, reduced domestic and reproductive labour for women fetching firewood or water, new green industries and jobs, green public transport, income streams from worker and community-owned or co-owned energy projects.

The energy transition does entail upfront investment costs. However, renewable energy costs continue to plummet, and a growing body of evidence shows that the combined value of avoided climate impacts – plus the social and economic co-benefits from the transition – dwarfs the transition's investment costs, if early action is taken. Indeed, the evidence indicates that far from it being too expensive to invest in the transition, it will be too expensive not to.

The key challenge therefore is not whether the clean energy transition will happen but how to shape it in favour of greater speed, justice, and shared prosperity. In recent years there has been growing recognition that a fair or just transition (see box 1) offers a historic opportunity to simultaneously:

- Improve people's lives, reduce inequalities and contribute to shared prosperity and other important development goals.
- Win wide public consent for the transition and hence ensures its viability and speed; and,
- Help mitigate the structural drivers of the climate crisis – such as the growth-orientated and extractive economic and business models and associated extreme economic inequality e.g., through public, cooperative, community and joint co-ownership models.

While numerous examples of just transition principles and pathways to a fairer and more secure future are emerging the operationalization of a just energy transition is still the exception rather than the norm. Elements of the transition's current overall trajectory are perpetuating extractive and exploitative practices of the past, entrenching inequalities and compounding historic injustices. This, in turn, is provoking understandable resistance from governments and the public, which will

slow the transition and generate further devastating consequences for people on the front line of the climate crisis. Indeed, a growing body of evidence suggests that a fast transition will not be possible unless it is also fair.¹

In contrast, the illustrative case studies documented in this report offer a positive vision of the benefits of a just transition and a compelling rationale for why governments, donors, multilateral agencies, investors, and civil society should put justice and rights at the heart of transition. While none of the cases fully meet all the just energy transition principles, and not all are fully operational, they counter claims that climate action is unfeasible, too costly, unfairly burdens the public, or that just and inclusive approaches are too time-consuming. Taken together case study insights include that:

- Fast, just and transformative clean energy initiatives are feasible, desirable and emerging.
- The multiple social and economic co-benefits of clean energy initiatives can improve people's lives and contribute to important development goals.
- When clean energy initiatives are designed equitably so their costs and co-benefits are fairly and widely shared, they can also simultaneously help reduce poverty and (intersectional) inequalities and contribute to shared prosperity.
- Fair and inclusive approaches can also help ensure public buy-in, reduce costly delays downstream, and ensure project viability. For example, initiatives that invest time in engaging stakeholders (including FPIC for Indigenous Peoples and fair dialogue with workers) and making any needed modifications at the proposal stage can avoid resistance, costly project delays and financial losses downstream.
- Strong and representative civil society and Indigenous Peoples organisations can help ensure project effectiveness and viability due to their local and technical knowledge and advocacy for human rights and environmental protections.
- Clean energy initiatives can be designed to simultaneously mitigate the drivers of the climate crisis by, for example, helping reduce economic inequality and adopting community benefit or co-equity business models in place of dominant extractive profit-driven business models.

The case studies could be improved by closer adherence to justice principles including strengthened intersectional (distributional) analysis and design, independent grievance mechanisms and enhanced remedy. Nonetheless, the evidence from these and other cases highlights and supports the case for governments to rapidly institute ambitious and fair financial, regulatory and policy frameworks to speed a just transition, including via:

- Full, fair and more accessible international climate finance, particularly public grants and concessional finance.
- Ambitious, inclusive, and just national financial, regulatory, and policy

frameworks (informed by intersectional distributional/equality analysis and continuous learning and adaptation).

- Strong protection of human rights (for workers, Indigenous Peoples, communities, women, etc.) and the environment, including (a) mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence regulation for businesses and (b) conditioning the provision of blended finance and guarantees to investors and companies on their adherence to just transition principles and respect for human rights and environmental standards.
- Support for fair and sustainable economic and business models – including socially, community or indigenous-owned or co-owned renewable energy projects - via legislative changes, financial incentives, government procurement and practical support.
- Reforms to international trade and investment rules, including the elimination of International Investor-State Dispute Settlement mechanism which can constrain government policy.

1. Background and purpose

The continued use of fossil fuels is intensifying the climate crisis and devastating people's lives and the natural world across the globe. It is a crisis super-charged by extreme inequality in which, as the UN General Secretary succinctly put it, 'the rich cause the problem and the poor pay the price'.² Yet energy also powers much of people's lives and is vital to human flourishing and economic development, although many still lack access to it. The good news is that the clean energy transition is gathering pace and scale, despite some resistance by fossil fuel incumbents and opponents. Renewable energy costs are continuing to plummet and its uptake is generating benefits and improving people's lives across the world, including via improved energy access, more reliable and secure energy supplies, lower or less volatile fuel bills, improved health, reduced domestic and reproductive labour for women such as fetching firewood or water, new green industries and jobs, green public transport, income streams from worker and community-owned or co-owned energy projects. In fact, a growing body of evidence shows that the value of avoided climate impacts – combined with the social and economic co-benefits from the transition – dwarfs the transition's investment costs, if early action is taken. Indeed, the evidence shows that far from it being too expensive to invest in the transition, it will be too expensive not to.³

The key challenge therefore is not whether the transition will happen but rather how to ensure that it is both sufficiently fast to avoid catastrophic climate impacts, and also sufficiently equitable so that its responsibilities, costs and benefits are shared fairly among countries and different social groups. In recent years, there has been growing recognition that a fair clean energy transition ([see box 1](#)) offers a historic opportunity to simultaneously:

- Improve people's lives, reduce inequalities, and contribute to shared prosperity and other important development goals.
- Win wide public consent for the transition and hence ensure its viability and speed.
- Help mitigate the key drivers of the climate crisis and unjust transition – such as the growth-orientated and extractive economic and business models and associated extreme inequalities e.g., through public, cooperative, community and joint co-ownership models.

Conversely, unjust transition policies and projects will entrench inequalities, generate understandable public resistance and in turn slow the transition. As a growing body of evidence demonstrates,⁴ the transition is unlikely to be fast if it is not also fair.

Box 1. Understanding and definitions of a just transition

The original concept of a just transition was coined by the trade union movement and aimed to protect the rights of workers made redundant by the fossil fuel sector. It was subsequently widened by International Labour Organization (ILO) in its 2015 just transition guidelines, which state that ‘a just transition to a sustainable economy must contribute to the goals of decent work for all, social inclusion, and the eradication of poverty’.⁵ The concept has since been widely adopted by governments, companies and civil society⁶ including ‘a just transition declaration’ at COP26.⁷ While understandings and definitions vary somewhat, all converge around similar objectives.

Building on agreed negotiated international frameworks such as the ILO Just Transition Guidelines the **International Labour Movement** has put forward the following definition: ‘A Just Transition secures the future and livelihoods of all workers and their communities during the transition to a low-carbon economy, effectively limiting global temperature rises to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, protecting the environment and restoring biodiversity in line with scientific consensus. Its objective is to stop the exploitation of people and the planet and contribute to the achievement of the sustainable development goals and to end inequalities between and within countries. A Just Transition is rooted in international solidarity and cooperation, delivering decent livelihoods and welfare for all... and based on the protection, promotion and enforcement of rights that deliver intra-, intergenerational, and gender equity, racial justice, respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples, impacted communities, and migrants, and promotes and protects human rights and ILO fundamental labour rights.’⁸ The Recommendations of the **IEA’s Global Commission on People-Centred Clean Energy Transitions** call for governments and international stakeholders to ensure just transitions with a focus on skills, decent jobs and worker protection; social and economic development; equity, social inclusion and fairness; and engaging people as active participants (IEA, 2021).⁹ **The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre’s** ‘Just Energy Transition Principles’ call for state and private sector commitment to a corporate duty of care for human rights and environmental due diligence, free and fair negotiations, and shared prosperity with communities and workers (BHRRC updated 2025).¹⁰ For **Oxfam**, a just transition must be fast so it mitigates climate change in line with the science, fair so it reduces existing injustices and (intersectional) inequalities and injustices, and transformative so it addresses the underlying drivers of the interlinked climate and inequality crises.¹¹

Yet while recognition of the need for a just transition is becoming more mainstream, its operationalization is still the exception rather than the norm. There are too many instances where considerations of justice, development, and rights are ignored or neglected. High-emitting wealthy countries still fail to undertake their fair share of global climate mitigation¹² or provide adequate climate finance and investment to help low-income countries mitigate, adapt and to address loss and damage.¹³ The financial benefits of renewable energy and transition mineral projects are captured by private investors, while the lack of effective human rights and environmental safeguards means that costs are pushed onto communities and workers via, for example, lack of meaningful consultation and respect for Free, Prior, and Informed

Consent (FPIC), land expropriation, inadequate social protection for redundant fossil fuel workers, or lack of remedy for environmental harms.¹⁴ At the same time, unequal trade and economic rules can constrain Global South governments from accessing or developing green technologies.¹⁵ Such injustices come on top of and compound previous traumatic experiences suffered by communities during colonialism and subsequent extractive practices and harms from fossil fuel and mineral extraction, as well as from unequal international trade and investment rules.^{16 17}

In 2023, only 36% of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) –45 NDCs covering 71 countries –explicitly mentioned a ‘just transition’.¹⁸ According to one study, just 36% of previously surveyed key net-zero criteria across 33 standards and voluntary initiatives mentioned climate justice or equity.¹⁹ The Business and Human Rights Centre's 2023 renewable energy benchmark finds that while a number of major renewable energy companies have human rights policies in place –a significant step forward in recent years–gaps between these policies and human rights commitments in practice persist.²⁰ A recent influential large-scale study assessing the effectiveness of 1,500 government climate policies in 35 countries failed to consider their distributional²¹ impacts.²² Another study found that Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) modelling future global and country climate mitigation pathways focuses on technological pathways without considering equity and justice.²³

Nevertheless, there are also many examples of just and transformational principles and energy solutions emerging that offer potential pathways to a fairer, prosperous and more secure future.²⁴ This research report documents and assesses six such cases ([Table 1](#)) with the intention of motivating decision-makers and practitioners to put justice, equity and rights at the heart of transition initiatives. While none of the cases are perfect, nor fully meet all the just energy transition principles ([see section 2.2](#)), they demonstrate the significant value of incorporating justice and rights-based approaches in energy transition initiatives.

2. Research cases and methodology

2.1. The case studies

A long list of 25 potential cases were identified by Oxfam, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRCC), International Energy Agency (IEA), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) from their and other organisations' just transition work. Six cases were then shortlisted

according to the following criteria:

- Adherence to two or more just transition principles/criteria ([see Section 2.2](#)).
- Achieves impact at the meso- or national-level scale; that is, beyond micro-level community projects.
- Mainly located in the Global South.
- Represents an illustrative mix of:
 - renewable energy, transition minerals, and decommissioning of fossil fuels initiatives.
 - community, private, public and co-equity ownership and business models
 - different countries and regions.
- Contains insights for future policy and practice, including financing a just transition.
- Has adequate secondary information.
- Can be verified and peer-reviewed by some stakeholders, particularly, if and where possible, by affected workers and communities.

Table 1. Summary of shortlisted energy cases

Case study name and country	Type - renewable, energy, exit from fossil fuels, transition minerals	Status	Ownership type - public, private, community, mix	Financing - international/domestic, private/public, mix
<i>Switch to Renewable Energy</i>				
Māori co-owned Geothermal Plant, New Zealand (Nga Awa Purua),	Renewable energy: geothermal plant	Operational	Co-ownership/equity between a state majority owned publicly listed company and a Māori regional trust,	Mainly national funding. Mix of private institutional investors and Māori landowners
Government-supported Energy Communities, Colombia	Government policy and renewable energies mix	Operational	Government supported, mainly community-owned but also some public and private, renewable energy projects	A mix of government, international cooperation and private sector, but primarily public finance.
Kipeto, Wind Farm, Kenya ²⁵	Renewable energy: wind farm	Operational	Private company (Kipeto Energy Ltd) in consultation with Masai community, plus community trust	Foreign investment A mix of loans, equity and grants
NGO & community micro-hydro schemes, Pakistan (SRSP)	Renewable energy: micro-hydro	Operational	Joint management/operation between NGO (Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP) and	Substantial international and national funding A mix of public, private and community funding.

Case study name and country	Type - renewable, energy, exit from fossil fuels, transition minerals	Status	Ownership type - public, private, community, mix	Financing - international/domestic, private/public, mix
			communities	
<i>Exit from Fossil Fuels</i>				
Government coal de-commissioning Mpumalanga, South Africa	Coal decommissioning	Planned	Government (Eskom) including consultation efforts with workers and communities	A mix of international and national funding. A mix of public and private funding, mainly domestic public funding from Eskom.
<i>Transition Minerals</i>				
Reform of government mining laws, Mexico	Transition Minerals and related mining laws	Pending implementation	Government, in response to concerns of Indigenous communities and workers	Requires mining companies to internalize some of social and environmental costs of mining.

2.2. Just transition assessment framework

The just transition principles used for the assessment framework were previously identified from a systematic literature review and from the frameworks of the ILO and advisory organizations.²⁶ In line with this, a just transition is considered to have the following elements:

1. **Globally fast** in line with the science and countries' fair shares of global mitigation to prevent drastically worsening climate impacts, which disproportionately harm low-income and marginalized countries and groups who are least responsible for the crisis;
2. **Just and people-centred**, so that the transition reduces, rather than exacerbates, existing and historic (intersectional) inequalities and injustices), generates shared prosperity, and garners wide public consent by:
 - **Recognising the injustices, inequalities, rights and knowledge of affected people**, particularly low-income, Indigenous, women and other marginalized communities and workers – for example, via intersectional distributional impact assessments to inform the design of transition initiatives. (*Recognition justice*)
 - **Inclusive stakeholder engagement and fair social dialogue between governments, business and workers**,²⁷ so that affected workers, social groups and communities have meaningful say in the design and implementation of transition policies and projects, and their

rights, for example, to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) for Indigenous communities, and freedom of association, collective bargaining and protest are protected. (*Procedural justice*)

- **Fair outcomes that contribute to shared prosperity** (*Distributional justice*), including by ensuring:
 - *a fair share of transition responsibilities* so that the major polluters – including wealthy countries, corporations, and individuals – mitigate the fastest and furthest (in line with internationally agreed principles of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities), leaving the remaining carbon budget for low emitters.²⁸
 - *full and fair finance* whereby the biggest and better-off polluters shoulder the main costs of the transition, including by providing finance to low-income/low-emitting countries and communities (in line with the internationally agreed polluter pays principle); ensuring adequate provision of public grant finance to fund the just elements of the transition; and avoiding regressive financing that pushes costs onto low-income people.
 - *a fair and wide sharing of benefits* whereby low-emitting, low-income or marginalized social groups, communities and workers can enjoy the opportunities created by the clean energy transition, including affordable and secure access to clean energy, decent work with living wages²⁹ and social and community ownership.³⁰
 - *protection and promotion of relevant human rights and the environment* to prevent costs being pushed onto low-income individuals and groups, including the rights to land, reskilling and social security protection for workers made redundant from the fossil -fuel sector, decent work and fair wages in the emerging green economy, health and safety, a clean environment.
- **Fair remedy or reparation** so that people and communities negatively affected by the energy transition and climate impacts are fairly compensated for unavoidable harm. (*Remedial justice*)

JET and Workers' Rights

The International Labour Movement specifies that Just Transition plans should be co-created and negotiated with workers and their trade unions to provide and guarantee decent work, job security, training, skills development and social protection for all workers affected by global warming and climate change policies. Plans must be fully financed and underpinned by fundamental labour rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining and facilitated through social dialogue between workers and their unions, employers, and governments as established by the ILO. It applies to all economic sectors (formal and informal), at all policy levels (company, sector, national, and global), representing all workers, marginalised and non-marginalised workers, in the global North

3. **Transformative** so that as well as reducing emissions, the clean energy transition is designed to simultaneously transform the drivers of the climate crisis including dominant profit-orientated and extractive economic and business models and associated inequalities.

2.3. Research methods and limitations

The case studies were researched and drafted by Oxfam researchers and supervised by an advisory group of experts from various organizations, including the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC), the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the International Trade Union Confederation. The research was primarily based on secondary documentation supplemented by interviews or reviews by individuals with knowledge of the case studies. Triangulation of different secondary data sources was used to enhance the reliability of the findings. A key shortlisting criterion was that at least one representative of an implementing organization and/or affected communities would be available and willing to comment and help validate the case studies. The research relied heavily on existing literature, some of which was produced by stakeholders involved in the projects whether government, private sector and/or civil society. Additionally, most cases lacked published independent evaluations, which would have provided more objective assessments. These factors may have inadvertently introduced biases, as such reports emphasize positive outcomes and may underreport or overlook criticisms and challenges faced during a project's implementation. Additionally, intersectional analysis and community perspectives are often under-represented in the published literature, which may result in an incomplete understanding of the experiences, grievances, and unmet needs of affected communities and workers. Consequently, the research may inadvertently overlook some critical aspects of distributive and procedural justice, and going forward, further 'ground-truthing' is needed to ensure that community and worker perspectives are more fully included in the discussion.³² Nevertheless, the cases provide positive indications of what is possible.

3. Case study insights

Taken together, the six case studies show that just clean energy initiatives exist and can provide distinct advantages to those that solely focus on achieving carbon reduction.

3.1. Effectiveness and speed

3.1.1. Emissions reduction

Given their historically lower emissions and pressing development challenges, the priorities of many lower-income countries are to expand energy access and achieve other pressing development goals, rather than reduce carbon emissions per se. Indeed, the internationally agreed principle of shared but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities means that lower-income, lower-emitting countries should be given priority use of the remaining global carbon budget and longer timeframes for the transition to clean energy, as well as financial support from wealthy high-emitting countries. However, despite their relatively small national emissions, most of the shortlisted cases sought and achieved significant reductions in carbon emissions. For example, Kenya's wind farm reduces emissions by an estimated 450,000 tonnes of CO₂ annually; New Zealand's geothermal plant offsets a considerable amount of CO₂ through its renewable energy generation, while Pakistan's micro-hydro projects contribute to carbon reduction by providing rural communities with renewable energy and reducing reliance on fossil fuels and related emissions. Meanwhile, South Africa's planned coal decommissioning effort aims to align its economy with NDC targets by 2030. Colombia's energy communities initiative demonstrates how expanding clean energy access can deliver community benefits while achieving a projected annual CO₂ reduction of 3.7 million tonnes.

3.1.2. Co-benefits

The case studies generated, or are expected to generate economic and social co-benefits, reaching 200,000 people in Colombia—despite being in its early implementation stages—and nearly one million people in Pakistan. South Africa's coal decommissioning plan could potentially create 79,000 new clean energy jobs by 2030, helping to offset those lost in the transition. Generated or expected co-benefits from the cases include:

- **Improved Energy access and security:** Improved affordability and a more reliable electricity supply to national grids and communities (New Zealand, Kenya, and Pakistan), as well as expanded access for historically marginalized populations (Colombia).

Economic co-benefits:

- Income and dividends for local communities (Colombia, New Zealand, Kenya).
- Job creation (New Zealand, Kenya, South Africa).

- New small-scale local businesses, including agricultural processing and home-based businesses (Colombia, Pakistan), with the latter mainly run by women (Pakistan).
- Reduced time and labour, particularly for women, spent gathering traditional biomass fuels for firewood (Pakistan).
- Strengthened community cohesion through solidarity, cooperation, and self-governance (Colombia).
- Improved educational opportunities and health services, as schools and homes now have consistent lighting, including in the evenings (Pakistan, Colombia).

Social co-benefits:

- Improved participation in decision-making (New Zealand).
- Social protection measures for displaced workers, including early retirement packages, reskilling programmes, and job placement assistance (South Africa).
- Reduced health problems and deaths from air pollution (South Africa).
- Just energy transition schools providing new skills and capacities (Colombia).
- Enhanced community wellbeing and pride (New Zealand).
- Infrastructure investments, including roads, schools, and medical facilities (Kenya, Colombia).
- Reduced resistance or conflict related to energy projects (Kenya, Pakistan, Mexico).
- Contributions to peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions (Colombia).

Environmental co-benefits:

- Improved local biodiversity conservation (Kenya, Pakistan).
- Reduced deforestation (Pakistan, Colombia).
- Reduced environmental despoliation and/or improved water, natural resources, and environmental conservation (New Zealand, Mexico, Colombia)
- Potential environmental restoration (South Africa, Mexico).

3.1.3. Costs

The case studies entailed considerable investment costs but were all able to obtain the needed finance (see below). More widely, renewable energy costs are continuing to plummet, and a growing body of evidence shows that the combined value of avoided climate impacts – plus the social and economic co-benefits from the transition – dwarfs the transition’s investment costs if early action is taken³³. Indeed, far from it being too expensive for governments to invest in the transition, it is too expensive for them not to. Some case studies, such as the coal decommissioning case in South Africa also losses to government revenue and jobs and it is not yet entirely clear whether sufficient quantity and quality of finance will be obtained to help offset them which would undermine the justice and hence likely speed of the transition.

3.1.4. Speed

The speed and effectiveness of the cases are influenced by the availability of finance and other contextual factors including justice. The

case suggests that just approaches can enhance speed. While upstream consultations lengthened the proposal phase in some cases, none of the renewable energy cases faced prolonged delays due to resistance, conflict, or protests from workers and communities. This suggests that fairer and more inclusive approaches – that invest time at the proposal stage to engage affected workers and communities, respect FPIC and make any needed modifications – can help ensure buy-in and reduce costly delays downstream.³⁴ Conversely, a growing body of evidence shows that unjust approaches can cause project delays and financial losses due to community resistance and protests. For example, in 2022, protests by disaffected communities halted operations at Peru’s Las Bambas copper mine. In Chile, the government rejected a key expansion permit for Anglo American’s Los Bronces copper mine, reportedly due in part to public health concerns. Meanwhile, Serbia cancelled Rio Tinto’s lithium project in Jadar following intense community opposition, halting the project for two years.³⁵ Nonetheless, the case studies show that just approaches can also face delays due to resistance from vested interests, as in the case of Mexico’s mining reforms and South Africa’s coal decommissioning plans.

3.2 Just and people-centred

3.2.1. Recognition of the injustices, inequalities, rights and knowledge of affected people

Recognition justice is an important and often strongly felt, but often neglected, principle that is important in its own right but can also help ensure inclusive and equitable consultation, design, and outcomes (see below). The absence of Recognition Justice can generate grievances and resistance and legitimise attacks on human rights defenders.³⁶ All six case studies involved prior efforts to understand the inequalities, rights, and/or knowledge of affected workers and communities. This in turn helped ensure that project design and implementation benefited workers and communities, including Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant communities, rural populations, and women ([Box 2](#)) and addressed historical inequalities. However, none of the cases appeared to have conducted comprehensive prior intersectional, distributional impact assessments, which suggests that inequalities were likely not fully understood, and, in turn, that project design and implementation is unlikely to have fully considered or adequately addressed them.

Box 2. Recognition justice: energy communities, Colombia

The design of the Government Energy Communities initiative in Colombia is based on a recognition of historical and structural inequalities.³⁷ It aims to democratize and decentralize energy services to reach, and benefit marginalized communities that are either unconnected to the grid or reliant on an unreliable and costly fossil-fuel energy supply. It also recognizes the unique jurisdiction of ethnic (Indigenous and Black) communities and their collective and sovereign land governance rights,

enabling them to manage and own energy generated within their jurisdictions according to their own laws and customs. The initiative further respects the diverse needs and preferences of different communities by enabling them to tailor just transition solutions to their contexts. Inclusivity and diversity criteria are used to select priority energy communities for implementation, considering factors such as energy poverty, multidimensional poverty, gender inequality and the inclusion of areas most affected by armed conflict. Special attention is given to Black, Afro-descendant, Raizal and Palenquera communities, Indigenous Peoples and peasant populations, as well as territories historically neglected by the state.³⁸

3.2.2. Meaningful and inclusive participation in decision-making

Fair social dialogue and stakeholder engagement are key elements of a just approach and can help strengthen the relevance, effectiveness, and equity of transition policies and projects. The international labour movement, for example, states that Just Transition plans should be co-created and negotiated with workers and their trade unions....at all policy levels (company, sector, national and global) representing all workers, marginalised and non-marginalised workers, in the global North and South, documented or undocumented migrants or refugees at work (ITUC, 2023).³⁹ Consultation is often a national legal requirement but is not necessarily adhered to or enforced in practice or is undertaken in a cursory manner.

All the projects involved or consulted affected communities and workers to varying degrees including co-ownership and governance between a Māori trust and a private company (New Zealand); national consultations and voluntary collaboration between government and communities (Colombia); community-driven management led by a non-governmental organisation (Pakistan); and community engagement and consultation by a company (Kenya). The existence of strong organizations like the Māori regional trusts in New Zealand, trade unions in South Africa, and Indigenous and other social movements in Mexico played important roles in ensuring either meaningful engagement or involvement in decision-making in these cases.

Box 3. Procedural justice: Māori Land Trust, New Zealand

The Nga Awa Purua Geothermal Plant exemplifies procedural justice through its inclusive governance structures. While granting or making available equity shares to Indigenous Peoples' does not equate to FPIC, in practice, it can ensure their involvement in governance and management of a projects.⁴⁰ For example, Indigenous Peoples are involved in the leadership of the project, and the board of the Māori Land Trust (Tauhara North No. 2 Trust), which helps ensure that its people are fully informed and that active and ongoing consent is secured before and during the implementation of the project. This in turn ensures that Māori voices are central to decision-making and the long-term sustainability of the project.

The model represents a significant step toward recognition, procedural and distributional justice in energy transitions.

3.2.3. Equity and shared prosperity

The case studies illustrate varying approaches and degrees of success in achieving equitable outcomes in relation to the following issues:

- **A fair share of transition responsibilities:** Lower-income countries have minimal responsibility for the climate crisis yet five of the cases sought to reduce carbon emissions. South Africa, the largest emitter, is seeking to achieve the biggest emission reductions, although its ability to do so may be limited by lack of finance, infrastructural lock-in, and resistance from fossil fuel incumbents and other vested interests.
- **Full and fair climate finance:** Except for Mexico, all the cases received some international climate finance from wealthy governments or companies, an essential element of climate justice and vital to enable lower-income countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Additionally, all but the Mexico case received some public and concessional finance, suggesting its importance for enabling a just and fast transition. For example, concessional finance from international institutions helped reduce the Kipeto wind farm's financial risks, allowing it to provide energy at a lower cost and expand clean energy access to some previously unconnected communities. However, some community members living next to the wind farm report that their energy access has not yet improved. They note that only families who have been relocated because of the project have received solar lamps. Similarly, Pakistan's micro-hydro schemes relied on concessional finance to subsidize energy access in remote areas, preventing immediate increases in tariffs and allowing these communities to transition to renewable energy sources without significant economic burden. In South Africa, concessional finance aims to support funding for retraining workers, mitigating job losses for coal-dependent communities. Much of the domestic funding for South Africa's transition is expected to come from domestic sources as it is a higher-income country, however some of this will come from carbon tax on carbon-intensive industries, which risks regressive impacts. Local funding from Māori communities has played a role in ensuring local ownership and financial viability in the New Zealand case. Nevertheless, information about the sources, amounts, types, terms and conditions of private and concessional finance was unavailable or opaque, highlighting the need for greater transparency, particularly where public finance is involved. Colombia stands out as a case where public funds fully financed the clean energy project, ensuring that communities were not burdened with loans.
- **Shared benefit:** A just transition requires not only that economic and social co-benefits are generated, but also that they are shared fairly and widely, particularly with affected rights holders including workers, women, low-income and marginalised communities. Without intentional measures to ensure equitable benefit sharing,

including via protection of people's rights, co-ownership arrangements, subsidies and practical support, benefits are likely to be captured by private companies or wealthier households. All six case studies intentionally sought to and succeeded in sharing co-benefits with low-income and marginalized communities to some extent. The co-ownership model between a Māori trust and a government-owned company in New Zealand is a standout example of distributive justice (Box 3). The Māori community holds a 35% equity stake, ensuring involvement in governance and a share in the financial returns. The Colombian Energy Communities initiative ensures that, as well as benefiting from energy access, communities actively participate in either the ownership, generation, management and/or distribution, of renewable energy fostering shared prosperity. Kenya's wind farm supplies clean energy to the national grid and includes planned profit-sharing arrangements with the local Maasai communities, although the relevant Community Fund has not been operationalised yet according to community members. Pakistan micro-hydro projects benefit low-income rural communities, particularly women. South Africa's planned coal decommissioning project in Mpumalanga aims to provide compensation and retraining for affected workers although it is not yet clear whether there will be sufficient finance to achieve this. Ensuring decent work, job security, living wages in the emerging clean energy economy is also fundamental to shared prosperity. However, in most cases, detailed intersectional distributional assessments or monitoring were rarely undertaken so it is difficult to ascertain the impact on women or different ethnic groups.

Box 4. Energy poverty and gender

The climate crisis is driven by the burning of fossil fuels. But energy is also vital for human flourishing and economic development. It liberates people from time-consuming physical labour and powers much of the transport we use, the food we eat, the way we light and heat our buildings, the goods we buy and the delivery of health, education and other services. Energy is also vital for social reproduction, including child and elder care and domestic duties, that are foundational to the reproduction of the workforce. However, many people, particularly in Global South countries, lack access to reliable and affordable energy. Energy poverty affects everyone, but women and girls are often the most severely affected when electricity is unavailable or unaffordable. They may have to spend several hours a day walking to gather biomass and water for cooking, lighting, heating and cleaning. This limits their access to education, employment, and participation in public and political life, restricting their rights and opportunities. Additionally, burning biomass is harmful due to the indoor air pollution that it creates. Meanwhile, the climate crisis is exacerbating existing gender inequalities, disproportionately affecting women especially in the Global South, by increasing the burden of unpaid care work.

Source: Oxfam South Africa (2024); GIESCR (2020); COSATU (2012).

Protection of Rights and the Environment: Proper protection of human rights and the environment is the responsibility of governments,

investors, and companies and is critical to prevent energy transition costs from being externalized and pushed onto workers' communities.⁴¹ Evidence of widespread rights violations in the fossil fuel and, to a lesser but still concerning extent, in the emerging clean energy sectors shows that voluntary efforts are often insufficient to prevent human rights and environmental abuses, and that national legislation and regulation are needed.⁴² In the New Zealand case, the Treaty of Waitangi and related laws helped to ensure that Māori rights were incorporated into renewable energy projects. In South Africa, national legislation requires consultations with workers and local communities affected by the closure of coal plants. In Colombia, legislation acknowledges the distinct jurisdiction of ethnic communities, including Indigenous and Black groups, affirming their collective and sovereign rights to land governance. However, legislation is not always enforced unless active pressure from civil society and other organizations exists. All the cases demonstrate the importance of stakeholders taking proactive and additional steps to protect rights and the environment. The New Zealand, South Africa, Colombia and Mexico cases demonstrate the important complementary role that strong of representative community-based organizations and social movements play in defending rights and the environment.

3.2.4. Fair remedy

The six case studies employ different approaches with varying levels of effectiveness in addressing social and environmental harms. However, none include an independent grievance mechanism, which is considered the gold standard for accountability. The Energy Communities in Colombia initiative has effectively integrated elements of reparative justice by prioritizing victims of armed conflict and historically neglected populations, addressing past injustices while building climate resilience. The New Zealand case provided one of the most advanced and structured examples of remedial processes among the cases, including grievance mechanisms to address social and environmental concerns, compensation for land use, and acknowledgement of cultural rights. Some of these elements have been made possible due to ongoing national remedial mechanisms. However, only a small percentage of Māori land has been returned to date, highlighting the need for continued progress in addressing historical grievances.⁴³ South Africa's coal decommissioning plan in Mpumalanga intends to include robust social protection measures, including compensation, retraining for affected workers and environmental remediation, though there is a risk that inadequate finance, the scale of redundancies and other challenges will outpace available remedies and the ability of decision-makers and institutions to provide this.

3.2.6. Transformative impact

The cases studied are contributing to wider transformative change in several ways. First, by adhering to some of the key just transition principles, the projects model a new mark, a positive departure from the dominant extractive and exploitative business models that have historically characterized energy and mineral resource development.⁴⁴ Such a shift is crucial for aligning economic activities with social equity

and environmental sustainability, marking a critical step toward a more inclusive and fairer economic paradigm. Second, as well as seeking to improve the lives of direct participants, most of these initiatives aim to have wider ripple effects throughout the community and local economies. For example, Pakistan's micro-hydro schemes not only enhance energy access in rural areas, which traditionally relied on biomass for energy, but this, in turn, reduces deforestation and supports local businesses and educational improvements. The participatory management model further strengthened community ownership and governance capacities, although it sometimes generated tensions that required careful management. Third, when the cases successfully model novel, just, and transformative transition approaches, such as the co-equity business model in New Zealand, or Colombia's Community Energy initiative, they provide evidence that can inform and catalyze replication and scaling. The Colombia case seems a rare example of how national government decarbonization policies can simultaneously support and enable strong community benefit sharing. However, their transformational impact would be further strengthened by comprehensive intersectional assessments as well as accompanying structural changes to reduce the inequalities of wealth and power, improve the quantity and quality of climate finance, strengthen government policy and regulation, and reform global economic rules and regulations.

4. Insights for governments' regulatory, policy and financial incentive frameworks

National regulatory and policy frameworks that integrate emissions reduction and equity play a critical role in ensuring just energy transitions. Yet too many countries' NDCs and national climate change policies still focus on carbon reduction only without due consideration of justice, human rights, and equity issues. While this research does not provide a comprehensive assessment of each country's policy and financial incentive frameworks, it identifies specific national policies conducive to helping ensure a just transition and gaps and constraints.

4.1. Regulatory and policy frameworks

In all the cases national legislation and policy play an important role in advancing just transitions such as: emissions reduction targets and plans; governance, consultation and transparency; the Indigenous

Peoples' right to FPIC, and human rights and environmental impact assessments; supportive policy and financial frameworks (e.g. the Colombia case); protection of human rights to organize and protest, labour rights, rights to land and a healthy clean environment; and environmental protections. The New Zealand case stands out for having elements of a policy framework that integrates Indigenous perspectives into renewable energy projects. The Treaty of Waitangi is often considered a foundational document in New Zealand's legal framework as it explicitly recognizes Māori rights and interests. However, its influence over how energy projects are developed and managed depends on its incorporation into specific legislation. For instance, the State-Owned Enterprises Act 1986 includes provisions that require consistency with the principles of the Treaty. Such legislative references help ensure that Māori rights and interests are considered in relevant projects.⁴⁵ Recent government proposals relating to renewable electricity generation and electricity transmission emphasize early engagement with Māori, protection of culturally significant sites, and support for small and community-scale renewable electricity generation to align with tangata whenua⁴⁶ aspirations in New Zealand's National Policy Statement for Renewable Electricity Generation (NPS-REG), although it is not clear if these proposals will be progressed by the current Government.⁴⁷ The Climate Change Response Act also underpins the country's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and incorporates Māori knowledge into national climate strategies. While this Act does not explicitly incorporate Māori knowledge into national climate strategies, other initiatives such as the Te Kōmata o Te Tonga (Deep South Science Challenge) have integrated mātauranga Māori (traditional Māori knowledge) into climate adaptation research (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2022). These efforts aim to ensure that the rights and interests of Māori communities are respected, promoting their active participation in New Zealand's transition to a low-carbon economy. Nevertheless, despite positive elements, none of the national governance, regulation, and policy frameworks constitute fully comprehensive, ambitious, and integrated just transition approaches, nor are they necessarily properly enforced and implemented.

4.2. Financing

The provision of international climate finance to lower-income countries, particularly public grants and concessionary finance, is both an issue of justice and essential to enable them to contribute to and benefit from the clean energy transition ([Box 5](#)). The Paris Agreement commits rich countries to provide climate finance to low-income countries that is needs-based, predictable, and aligned with development goals. However, the reality has been different with wealthy countries failing to deliver the needed finance, and climate finance prioritizing loans over grants, creating additional challenges for lower-income countries ([See Box 5](#)). The experience of South Africa's Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) illustrates some of these challenges. While initially heralded as a landmark financing deal, the heavy reliance on concessional and non-concessional loans—rather

than grants—has raised concerns about exacerbating South Africa's sovereign debt crisis and limiting its fiscal space for social investments essential to a just transition.⁴⁸ However, in relation to the cases the lack of publicly available information about private finance makes it difficult to assess, for example, the ratio of grants to loans, the specific uses of grants and subsidies, the conditions attached to them, and whether concessional finance would be sustained long-term or phased out as projects achieved economies of scale. This lack of financial transparency hinders knowledge-sharing, replication, and the broader adoption of just energy solutions.

Box 5. Public and Private climate finance

The private sector is increasingly regarded as the primary source of finance for the clean energy transition globally. However, while renewable energy projects do generate financial returns, public grants and concessional finance remain essential for ensuring a just transition for several reasons. First, private investors and companies' drive to maximize short-term financial returns means that they tend to focus on countries and projects with the greatest or most predictable financial returns, while neglecting projects with lower financial returns even when they may align better with energy access and other development goals. Second, the high cost of private capital in many lower-income countries restricts the amounts they can borrow, adds to indebtedness and can translate into higher energy tariffs, restricting energy affordability and access. Third, the attraction of private sector investment is usually accompanied by de-risking strategies, which are ultimately funded by public finance. Fourth, public finance is vital for financing the just and developmental elements of the energy transition for which there may be limited immediate financial returns for investors. Such elements may include subsidies to enable affordable energy tariffs (until costs fall due to economies of scale); incentives for diversification into new green industries and jobs; social protection for workers made redundant from the fossil fuel sector; remedy for harms; capacity building for state utilities and independent regulators; investment in green affordable infrastructure; and civil society consultation.

Despite the need for public funds, they are widely assumed to be scarce and wealthy countries have consistently failed to provide low-income countries with sufficient climate finance for mitigation or adaptation. As such the primary role of public finance in the energy transition is increasingly seen as a tool to de-risk private finance by providing it with concessional funding and government guarantees, known as blended finance. However, critics argue that blended finance diverts scarce public funds from the just transition while failing to mobilize private investment at the expected scale; shifts commercial risks onto governments while subsidizing private sector profits; and lacks enforceable conditions ensuring that private investors adhere to just transition principles, human rights and environmental standards. As an increasing number of studies show, wealthy governments could raise the urgently needed climate finance by taxing wealthy polluting companies and individuals.⁴⁹

4.3. Structural constraints

All the cases face some structural constraints. Across all cases, inadequate regulation and enforcement leave the rights of workers, women, and marginalized communities insufficiently protected. In some cases, progressive laws and policies face resistance or come under attack from vested interests. For example, in Mexico, the government's mining reforms, and in Colombia, the government's decision to stop issuing fossil fuel licenses, risk legal challenges from international companies under investment treaties and possible backlash from international markets. In New Zealand, a minority partner in the country's ruling coalition introduced a bill that sought to reinterpret the Waitangi treaty, which caused mass protests in late 2024 and ongoing anger and dismay.⁵⁰ In some cases, strong civil society organisations help counterbalance the lack of regulation, but in Kenya, unequal power relations between the company and the community hinder the delivery of fully just solutions. Climate finance has been an enabler of action in most of these cases, but South Africa's planned transition relies primarily on loan-based international finance, lacking the grant funding needed for a truly just transition. More widely, other unequal global economic rules can hinder just transitions.

5. Conclusion

The illustrative cases documented in this report represent a fraction of the just and transformative clean energy policies and projects that are emerging worldwide.⁵¹ The cases could be improved by closer adherence to justice principles including strengthened intersectional (distributional) analysis and design and stronger independent grievance mechanisms and enhanced remedy. Nonetheless, taken together they offer a positive vision of the benefits of a just transition and a strong rationale for why governments, donors, multilateral agencies, investors and civil society should ensure that justice and rights are at the heart of their policies and projects. Governments will need to institute ambitious and fair financial, regulatory and policy frameworks to shape the transition in favour of greater speed, justice, and shared prosperity and scale up and mainstream cases such as these.

Notes

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