

Unpacking the Just Transition in practice

Implementing just transition projects in South Africa – initially targeting workers and communities affected by the transition away from coal - will require a rethink of how projects are developed, funded and implemented. In addition, the pressure now is to move away from the theoretical and philosophical high-level policy debates around a just transition and to begin to implement real projects on the ground that are sustainable and offer alternative livelihoods. Hence, the focus should now be on learning by doing, which will play an important role in building a body of evidence to support and influence just transition policy going forward.

These were some of the key themes which emerged during a dialogue held last week on “Just Transition in action – rethinking traditional project development and support tool kits and policies” organised by Trade and Industrial Strategies Policies (TIPS) and the Germany-based Wuppertal Institut.

In setting the scene for the unfolding discussion, TIPS senior economist Gaylor Montmasson-Clair explained that the focus around the just transition had to now move beyond the high-level policy debates to what it means to implement just transition projects in practice on the ground. This needs to take into account that the policies and tools needed to support such projects might be different from traditional project development.

Wuppertal Institut researcher Lisa Kolde presented an overview of a toolkit that the Institut has developed to guide key stakeholders who are navigating a just transition in coal regions. The toolkit provides some important insights and guidelines of how to develop a regional transition strategy in coal regions; the processes which should guide such activities, including stakeholder engagement to ensure cooperation amongst all the stakeholders; what kind of support options are available for affected communities and ultimately, achieving economic diversification of coal regions.

TIPS Research Fellow Sandy Lowitt then went on to explain the characteristics and challenges of just transition projects in South Africa. However, before exploring these, she stressed that, in the South African context, “there are a lot of people who see the just transition as an opportunity to improve the lives of people, so the focus is not only to leave no one behind but to tackle poverty, inequality and unemployment so as to IMPROVE the lives of South Africans.” In view of this, the concepts of procedural, distributive and restorative justice are crucial to framing the just transition discourse and action agenda.

Looking at a sample of self-identified just transition projects, Lowitt pointed out that “defining what is a just transition project is a challenge for all of us.” Currently, there are a range of projects which are being planned. She stressed that there were a mix of projects – some are more ambitious than others but ultimately they all are important to achieve socio-economic development and a just transition. Existing projects are in sectors such as environmental restoration, biodiversity, agriculture and a few industrial/manufacturing projects.

During a panel discussion of different perspectives from South Africa, India and Indonesia on project development, Prishani Satyapal from Sustainability Truthing shared her experiences of working in communities in South Africa, Ghana and Tanzania. She stressed the importance of understanding existing realities on the ground. Reinforcing this point, Prof Asmita Kabra from the Advisory Body of the India Just Transition Centre highlighted the impact of coal mining on communities in India. She argued that the transition out of coal was in fact a second transition for such communities, with the initial transition being the loss of their rural and agricultural livelihoods



when their areas were industrialised and the coal industry developed. Learning from this experience, she argued that “intensive state investment for at least for a decade” was required to foster a just transition. In addition, guaranteed income security would be needed for those living in the coal districts. Looking at it globally, Kabra pointed out that there were few success stories of where livelihoods were restored. To be successful, resettlement should be land based and long-term income support provided, she highlighted. She concluded that reskilling was insufficient and a comprehensive package should include: financing of smallholder farming to become more viable; building more sustainable food security systems; investing in local manufacturing; kick-starting a clean energy sector; upgrading existing infrastructure; and direct cash transfers.

Dr Yahya Rachmana Hidayat, Director of Energy Resources, Mineral and Mining, at the Ministry of National Development Planning in Indonesia highlighted the scale of the challenge in a country like Indonesia where coal is one of the key features of the local economy. In such a case, a transition away from coal would require a change in the whole economy.

In drawing the discussion to a close, Timon Wehnert from the Wuppertal Institut pointed out that, whilst the focus was on coal, it was also about other sectors and how they too would need to transition. Ultimately, he stressed, when looking at a just transition in the coal regions, it was not just about substituting jobs but about regional transformation.

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<p>TIPS has set up a Just Transition Knowledge Portal to assist in building a body of work around the just transition: https://www.tips.org.za/just-transition</p>
