

# **BREAKING CHAINS, BUILDING BRIDGES: RETHINKING JUST TRANSITIONS FROM A GLOBAL SOUTH PERSPECTIVE**

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## Abstract

Industrialisation, while crucial for economic growth, often leads to greenhouse gas emissions and resource exploitation, posing significant environmental challenges. Industrialisation is a crucial means for Global South countries to create much needed jobs for growing youth populations, but the potential for sustainable green industrialisation is limited by a lack of technology and financial resources. The article explores this tension by examining the concept of a 'just transition', its implications for the Global South, and how the global community may support industrial transitions while minimising environmental impacts. Through analysis based on a literature review and interviews, the paper recommends the prioritisation of local employment, skill development, and green technology transfer through foreign direct investment in the Global South, and the adoption of energy efficiency standards to reduce energy waste and carbon emissions. It also suggests that Global North countries may support Southern industrialisation by accelerating their own green transition and leveraging their resources.

## Keywords

Just transition; green industrialisation; Global South; employment creation; climate change



## Evidence for decision-making

1. **Prioritise job creation and energy efficiency in green transitions.** Global South governments should focus just transition efforts on job creation, developing energy efficiency regulations, and structural transformation.
2. **Accelerate green transitions globally. Renewable energy alone cannot meet the Global South's energy demands.** Global North countries can compensate by accelerating their own transition to eco-friendly practices, technology transfer and adoption of equitable practices.
3. **Invest in sustainable local development.** Investors and funders can foster just transitions in the Global South by incentivising local employment, skills development and green technology innovation.
4. **Advocate for climate justice.** Governments and civil society must advocate for climate reparations. The UN, World Bank, and development institutions should prioritise integrating differentiated responsibilities into their funding and policy frameworks to advance climate justice.

## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are now considered a cornerstone of international development, emphasising progress without environmental damage (United Nations, 2015a). As many countries in the Global South become increasingly industrialised, and given that industrialisation often negatively impacts the environment (Saha et al, 2023; Ruba et al, 2021), it is crucial that environmental sustainability be an integral part of development. However, calls to ensure development is environmentally sustainable must be understood in the context of global inequities and historical responsibilities. In this way, it is vital to critically examine the SDGs through a justice lens from a Global South perspective (Chen, C. W., 2023; Garcia- Pena et al., 2020).



**Ensuring that development is environmentally sustainable must be understood within the context of global inequities and historical responsibilities.**

In contrast to the economically advanced nations of the Global North, overall countries in the Global South have higher poverty rates, higher unemployment rates, and fewer decent job opportunities, all of which may be related to lower industrialisation levels (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2015; Tregenna, 2007; Dinh et al., 2012; Kruglikova & Shatokhina, 2015). The Global South also leads in population growth, with sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries projected to contribute an additional 23–38 million people to the global population each year (Gu et al., 2021). Together, these factors make it advantageous—in development terms—for Global South countries to pursue a strategy of industrialisation. Yet, this has global environmental consequences.

Countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam provide pertinent examples of this tension. Both countries have rapidly industrialised through the growth of their textile industries, lifting millions out of poverty. However, this industrial growth has come at a significant environmental cost (Saha et al., 2023; Ruba et al., 2021; Sharpe et al., 2022). While the SDGs emphasise poverty reduction and decent work, achieving these universal goals without harming the environment is challenging. There is an urgent need to find a balance between the drive to industrialise in the Global South on the one hand, and the need to tackle environmental challenges on the other. However, the struggles of the Global South are often sidelined in globalisation debates, perpetuating marginalisation and invisibility, as highlighted by Arundhati

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Roy's metaphor of globalisation as a blinding light leaving many in darkness (Nixon, 2011; Davis, 2012; Nhamo, 2017).

This article examines the trade-offs between green transition<sup>1</sup> and industrialisation<sup>2</sup> processes in the Global South. Many countries in the Global South face two competing needs: first, the need to generate employment through industrialisation to accommodate an increasing number of young people who lack access to decent jobs,<sup>3</sup> and second, the pressure to transition towards eco-friendly production methods,<sup>4</sup> which requires financial and technological resources generally lacking in the Global South. These dual demands speak to the concept of a 'just transition',<sup>5</sup> which—according to the International Labour Organization (ILO)—involves a fair and inclusive shift to a sustainable economy, providing decent job opportunities and ensuring no one is left behind (ILO, 2015). This article aims to explore the practicability of this concept, and to propose a forward-thinking approach, addressing three crucial questions: i) What does a just transition involve?; ii) What could just transitions mean for Global South countries?; and iii) How can the global community collaborate to facilitate a just transition in the Global South while minimising environmental repercussions?

## Methods

This article employs a narrative review of literature supplemented by key informant interviews (KIIs) to explore the concept of a just transition in countries dealing with trade-offs between environmental protection and industrialisation. Literature was identified both through recommendations from experts and reviewers who had read the preliminary abstract, as well as Google Scholar keyword searches using terms such as "just transition," "green transition," "employment creation," "environmental policies," "climate change," "industrialisation," and "Global South." A snowballing technique was also employed, sourcing additional literature from the reference lists of already sampled works.

The selected texts were published within the last five years, focused on the Global South, and/or addressed key themes such as green transition,

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1. SDG 13: Climate Action
  2. SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure
  3. SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
  4. SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
  5. SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

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industrialisation, and employment, aligning closely with the study's regional scope and research objectives. The article also incorporates key reports, working papers, and policy documents from reputable organisations such as the African Union, UN, and ILO, which—while not peer reviewed—are critical for understanding the broader policy and contextual framework. Together, the sources provide important insights into industrialisation, sustainability, and socio-economic development, particularly in the Global South.

The literature review was supplemented by five KIIs. Each interview lasted 30–50 minutes and was guided by two questions: (1) What does the notion of 'just transition' mean for the Global South in light of green transitions and industrialisation for employment? and (2) In the spirit of leaving no one behind as stipulated in the SDGs, what are the emerging issues and challenges when it comes to green transition and industrialisation for the Global South? Interviews were conducted with purposively selected Tanzanian experts with 17 to 24 years' experience in relevant fields, comprising an environmental policy expert, an economist specialising in sustainable development, an industrial strategist focusing on green technologies, and government officials. Tanzania was selected due to the authors' familiarity with the local context and established networks, enabling efficient research within a limited timeframe. Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained and anonymity guaranteed.

Due to the limited specific literature on the green transition–industrialisation trade-off for the Global South, narrative synthesis is used which allows flexibility in exploring this topic. However, given that the review is not systematic, this method may introduce bias and subjective interpretations. Additionally, time constraints and limited resources meant the study was not able to use surveys or include a larger number of KIIs. Efforts have been made to minimise bias, but these limitations remain. The findings and conclusions should therefore be considered within the context of these methodological constraints. Nevertheless, the exploratory nature of this study provides foundational analysis, identifies research gaps, and seeks to inform future research and policy development.

Overall, the study aims to deepen understanding of the trade-offs faced by the Global South in working towards just transitions in the context of the SDGs and historical inequalities, and advocates for a paradigm shift towards a justice-informed approach to inclusive and sustainable development.



## Just transition revisited

The concept of the 'just transition' centres around environmental justice concerns in an attempt to rethink development through the growth of low-carbon, sustainable and inclusive economies. In its 2015 Guidelines, the ILO defines just transition as greening the economy while prioritising fairness, inclusivity, and creating decent work opportunities for everyone (ILO, 2015). The UN emphasises that just transition strategies, policies, and measures aim to ensure that no individual or community is disadvantaged in the shift towards green industrialisation (Tavares, 2022). It also serves as a unifying framework, bringing together diverse stakeholders including social movements, trade unions, environmentalists and policymakers, all united in the effort to ensure that equity is better integrated into low-carbon transition strategies (IPCC, 2022). Interview respondents highlighted that the essence of a just transition extends beyond mere environmental considerations, embodying a comprehensive commitment to equity both socially and economically (see Table 1).

The concept originates in the 1990s, when growing awareness of environmental degradation led to the introduction of new environmental regulations. However, these regulations often resulted in unintended consequences, including job losses in industries that relied heavily on polluting practices (Tavares, 2022). Unionists and activists, recognising the potential for adverse impacts on workers and communities, began calling for mechanisms to mitigate these effects and ensure a fair transition to more sustainable economic practices. This grassroots movement gave rise to the formation of the Just Transition Alliance, a coalition that brought together unionists and environmentalists in a shared commitment to addressing the intersection of labour rights and environmental sustainability (Morena et al., 2020). In this way, as noted by interviewees, although environmental policies might impact industrial employment, green industrialisation can also be an opportunity to create new jobs and industries.

## Just transitions in the Global South: The role of industrialisation in development

In countries of the Global South, such as those in SSA, the challenge is less about job loss brought about by a shift to green industries, and more about pre-existing widespread unemployment (Mbatha, 2021; Kappel, 2021). Indeed, key informants argued that for Global South countries, just transitions must focus on job creation. This aligns with Africa's Agenda 2063, which emphasises the need for structural transformation and industrialisation to



address youth unemployment (African Union, 2015). The UN Addis Ababa Action Agenda also includes an explicit commitment to industrial development for economic growth, diversification, and value addition in low- and middle-income countries (United Nations, 2015b). The fact that industrialisation, particularly in manufacturing, has historically created significant primary and secondary job opportunities (Bivens, 2019; Nosbuch & Bernaden, 2012), means that the push for a green transition may end up exacerbating global inequality.

**Table 1. Summary of interview findings**

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What does the notion of 'just transition' mean for the Global South in light of green transitions and industrialisation for employment?			In the spirit of leaving no one behind as stipulated in SDGs, what are the emerging issues and challenges when it comes to green transition and industrialisation for the Global South?	
Job creation and industrialisation?	Equity in transition	Capacity building and support	Balancing economic growth and environmental preservation	Energy efficiency and technological advancements
Just transition efforts in the Global South should focus on the creation of new jobs and industries through green industrialisation.	Ensure vulnerable communities are not disproportionately affected.	Build local capacities and provide technological and financial support.	Rapid industrialisation can lead to environmental degradation if not managed properly.	There is inefficiency in energy use hence the need to implement stringent energy efficiency standards.
	Emphasise the need for climate reparations by adopting a historical approach that acknowledges differentiated responsibilities across regions.	Support from the Global North in technology transfer and funding through FDS is crucial.	Integrating environmental considerations into economic planning is key to supporting a just transition in the Global South.	Global South lacks the technology, capacity, and financial resources to swiftly adopt green energy technologies.
	Address social and economic disparities when promoting environmental sustainability.		All SDGs have to be realised, hence decent work must also be prioritised in the Global South.	Investment in green technologies can drive both economic growth and environmental sustainability if carefully planned.
				By upgrading to energy-efficient machinery and processes, Global South governments can significantly reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions.

*Note.* Elaborated by the author

Swilling and Annecke (2012) argue that in certain contexts, efforts to make consumption and production more environmentally friendly may overlook this pressing challenge. They caution that significant investments by the private sector to develop low-carbon, resource-efficient economies, while failing to address existing inequalities, could lead to an unjust transition (Swilling & Annecke, 2012). The interviews also highlighted that while countries in the Global North possess the technology and resources to invest in eco-friendly methods of production and consumption, those in the Global

South face technological, financial, and human resource constraints. Consequently, these countries find it harder to capitalise on these advancements, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities (see Table 1).

When discussing industrialisation, particularly in manufacturing where there is a significant employment multiplier effect, the role of the energy sector is vital. A green transition must be based on green and renewable energy. However, many Global South countries lack the resources to adopt green energy technologies swiftly. Without access to the means to make green industrialisation work, there is a risk that many countries in the Global South will be forced to make a choice between prioritising employment through industrialisation or addressing the climate crisis—both of which would have negative consequences.



**Many countries in the Global South risk having to choose between prioritising industrialisation for employment or addressing the climate crisis.**

In response to growing energy demands linked to industrialisation, the African Common Position on Energy Access and Just Transition was endorsed in 2022, aiming for universal energy access while prioritising African development. Africa plans to use its energy resources, including non-renewable sources, and seeks global support in line with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (African Union, 2022). Interviews emphasise the need to integrate environmental considerations into economic plans even with limited financial and technological resources. Efforts can be introduced in short-term plans, to be fully realised in long-term plans as capacities are built. Since energy inefficiency remains a problem, implementing stringent energy efficiency standards and adopting advanced technologies to reduce energy waste and carbon emissions emerged as key priorities. It should be noted, however, that the issue of how Global South countries with limited resources can be supported to access these advanced technologies must be addressed, as also emerged from the interviews (see Table 1).

While employment remains a key focus for the just transition in this context, some perspectives diverge. Anabella Rosemberg (2020) highlights a lack of understanding among labour activists as to how environmental crises could render their efforts to protect workers' rights and create new job opportunities futile if there is ultimately no planet left for workers to inhabit (Rosemberg, 2020; Morena et al., 2020). It is worth asking whether it is not

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possible for collaborative efforts between the Global North and South to avert such a scenario, while at the same time enabling the Global South to focus on job creation for its youth.

## **Reflecting on just transitions, global inequalities and responsibilities**

A just transition approach to development aspires to balancing the need for environmental and economic sustainability, with the livelihood needs of individuals and communities. This is a unique challenge for the Global South, where the need to create jobs through industrialisation may limit the potential for environmental sustainability. In such a context, green industrialisation has the potential to bridge this gap between the seemingly contradictory demands to industrialise and to protect the environment. Yet, the green industrialisation capacity of different countries is highly uneven.

It is useful, then, to take a broader view, one that considers historical legacies, and asks how the Global South, especially SSA, ended up facing such a challenging dilemma. Nixon, in his book “Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor,” discusses the effect of Global North industrialisation, whose effects on the Global South have been slow, long-term, and often unnoticed in terms of environmental pollution (Nixon, 2021). The repercussions of waste dumping practices in Africa, for example, persist to this day. Indeed, the Global North is still responsible for a disproportionate amount of pollution (see for instance Ulgen, 2021). Moreover, industrialisation in the Global North, largely fuelled by resources from the South, has long given the North a developmental advantage, which persists to today in the form of huge social and economic inequity between North and South. Therefore, the challenges faced today by countries in the Global South to make a just transition to a greener economy are rooted in historic global inequalities. From this perspective, and given that the Global North has both technical and financial capacities, a just approach might well also require that the Global North supports Global South countries more proactively in this endeavour, in the interests not only of historical justice but also in averting global environmental catastrophe. In sum, a historical perspective is crucial for understanding the current challenges faced by the Global South, as the legacy of global inequality continues to disadvantage these regions in their efforts to transition to a greener economy.

This is not to say, however, that Southern countries should not be proactive when it comes to transitioning into green technologies. Rather, they should act within their capabilities, while building capacities in green energy

technologies. For instance, to try and combat energy loss and thus contribute to greening the economy, the African Union has devised a comprehensive common strategy that outlines short-, medium-, and long-term energy development plans (African Union, 2022). These pathways aim to accelerate progress towards universal energy access, while ensuring that crucial development objectives are not compromised. Within this strategy, Africa intends to utilise all available energy resources, both renewable and non-renewable, to meet its energy demands. Natural gas, low-carbon hydrogen, and nuclear energy are anticipated to play pivotal roles in expanding modern energy access in the short to medium term, while the uptake of renewables will be promoted in the long term to achieve a low-carbon, climate-resilient energy sector.

The critical need for energy for development—whether green or otherwise—has been demonstrated by Northern countries themselves when faced with resource shortages. The energy crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, for example, forced some rich Global North countries to revive coal-fired power plants (Cernoch, 2024; Belaid et al., 2023). Yet, this is a reality that many countries in the Global South have been facing for years, and still face today. This article underscores the fact that the Global South's energy needs cannot be fully met by renewable sources alone in the short to medium term, challenging the dominant narrative that exclusively prioritises green energy.

Moreover, prevailing global development finance mechanisms fail to adequately address the historical responsibility for the disproportionate and severe impacts endured by climate-affected communities in the Global South, as argued by Perry (2021). There is an urgent need for a substantial overhaul of development financing to address past injustices. Overall, there must be recognition of differentiated responsibilities concerning global goals, particularly on climate actions, to facilitate a collective, fair, and equitable global development agenda. The findings of this article suggest that any meaningful discussion of just transitions must include provision for climate reparations and differentiated responsibilities, reflecting the unique challenges and contributions of the Global South.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

This article highlights the need for just transition actions in the Global South to focus on offering job creation to address persistent unemployment. It also underscores the need for a historical approach which acknowledges differentiated responsibilities through climate reparations. Moreover, it recognises that the Global South's energy demands cannot be fully met

by renewable sources alone in the short to medium term, challenging the dominant narrative that exclusively prioritises green energy. Overall, therefore, the study calls for fair and equitable collaborations between the Global South and North. Based on these considerations, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Global North should assist in offsetting the environmental impact of the Global South's industrialisation through financing the adoption of cleaner technologies in the South, providing direct support for carbon offset projects, and speeding up their own transition to eco-friendly practices because they have the means (money and capabilities), as compared to the Global South.
2. Foreign direct investment to the Global South should prioritise projects that integrate profit-making with Global South transformative development. This involves focusing on sectors offering opportunities for local employment generation, skill development, and technology transfer, especially green technologies. By negotiating investment agreements that prioritise technology transfer and knowledge sharing, industries in the Global South can become more eco-friendly.
3. The Global South should strive to develop energy efficiency initiatives through implementing stringent energy efficiency standards and regulations across industries to significantly reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions. This may include measures such as upgrading industrial machinery to more energy-efficient models and optimising manufacturing processes.

Achieving green industrialisation in the Global South requires a multi-faceted approach. Collaborations which are fair and equitable between North and South are essential for overcoming challenges and maximising opportunities for sustainable global development. If each region is left alone to fight to achieve these goals, the end result will be shared failure, and the SDGs will remain an elusive agenda.

## **Areas for further research**

Despite an insightful review, this paper has limitations in its reliance on a small sample of key informants and the use of narrative synthesis, which while flexible, may introduce biases. A broader range of perspectives could uncover additional nuances or contradictory viewpoints that were not captured in this study. Additionally, due to the rapid pace of technological advancements in green energy and industrial practices, literature reviewed may not fully account for innovations or disruptions that could

significantly alter the trajectory of a just transition, particularly in terms of job creation and environmental impact. Nevertheless, the exploratory nature of this study provides foundational analysis, identifies research gaps, and informs future research and policy development.

Future research could explore additional methodologies not used in this study, such as surveys and a larger number of KIIs to enhance generalizability. Case studies could also be conducted to inform public policies and establish best practices. Additionally, narrowing the scope of the study—either by focusing on specific regions, levels of economic development within the Global South, or targeting a particular sector or type of climate crisis—could provide more targeted insights.

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