Opinion – Reclaiming Just Transition from Neocolonial Energy Agendas

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In the past few months, activists, scholars, and policymakers in the United States have been witnessing a major collapse of energy transition and environmental efforts, as the continuous climate denial of the Trump administration: abandoning climate multilateralism by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement twice, repealing the EPA's 2009 endangerment finding which concludes that greenhouse gases (GHG) threaten public health and safety, canceling regulations on drilling and pipeline development for the oil and gas industry, while ending tax credits for renewable energy like solar and wind power in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Despite depression and anxiety overflowing for the future of climate action, across the Atlantic Ocean in Bonn, Germany, the June Climate Meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have witnessed major progress for Just Transition negotiations, advocating for transition patterns without climate crisis, economic disruptions, or social inequalities.

The escalating heatwaves, extreme weather, and natural disasters underscore the severity of the climate crisis and the urgency of action. They demand a fundamental break from environmental extraction, fossil fuel combustion, and excessive production and consumption, while transitioning towards green pathways that emphasize social, environmental, and economic sustainability, focusing on decarbonization, renewable energy, and climate-resilient development. However, for countries and communities less capable of such transitions, due to either their dependency on fossil energy for development and livelihoods, or their dual positionality of insusceptibility to climate impacts and non-resilience for economic and technological transformation, the green transition can worsen inequality through displacement, gentrification, and unemployment.

Just Transition, in turn, emerges as a set of principles that requires equitable consideration of different people and communities in the transition process from high-carbon to low-carbon, from extraction to regeneration. It emphasizes equitable energy access, diversified low-carbon pathways, decent and secure jobs, gender equity, and fair evaluation of social impacts. The Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP), as the historical UNFCCC initiative on Just Transition, was created to facilitate countries transitioning to a low-carbon and climate-resilient future, while reducing inequalities for disproportionately affected countries and communities. In short, achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement justly and equitably. Since its establishment at COP 27 in 2022, there have been ongoing questions about its further refinement and implementation. In 2024, the World Resources Institute outlined five key elements for JTWP from the perspective of vulnerable developing countries:

1. Ensuring people-centered climate action
2. Addressing global inequity and rejecting oppressive global systems
3. Channeling unconditional support from developed countries
4. Creating comprehensive and flexible Just Transition pathways
5. Building synergies with other global climate-related workstreams

These elements offer an ideal institutional roadmap for Just Transition, guiding this multifaceted endeavor globally, regionally, and nationally.

Though promisingly envisioned, the real-world implementation of Just Transition is not free of debates. Scholars from

critical geography and political ecology have been cautioning against the "greening" of the historical extractive and imperial patterns in transitional works. The European Green Deal (EGD) is presented as the world's first state-led commitment to climate neutrality, aiming to 1) environmentally, reduce 55% of net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030, no net GHG emissions by 2050; 2) economically, decouple economic growth from resource use; 3) socially, leave no person and no place behind. Though the concept of Just Transition has been co-opted by EGD to reconcile social justice and climate action, this deal simultaneously emphasizes global competitiveness and market-driven solutions, suggesting a neoliberal economic focus that prioritizes economic growth over fundamental social change.

The recent debate on the "flexibilities" to achieve 90% net emission reduction in the EU 2040 climate target reflects such critique. The European Commission intends to incorporate international carbon offset credits under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, a long-contested false solution for reducing GHG emissions, to achieve "carbon neutral". Not only does this potential act go against the domestic nature of the target, as it allows offshoring GHG reduction efforts to poorer countries while tolerating more emissions within the jurisdiction; but the plan itself lacks sufficient analysis of the economic and emission consequences, like the threat to domestic green development and the high spending of quality credits. Moreover, what is lacking in critiques within the EU is an acknowledgment of the burden and damage that the plan imposes on indigenous communities and Southern countries, where most carbon sinks are situated. Such evasion, recklessness, and irresponsibility clearly convey the European Commission's reluctance to sacrifice capitalist growth for equitable climate action. Almeida et al further such critiques, arguing that the EGD is a new discursive strategy that uses sustainable initiatives to mask the EU's neocolonial agenda of continued economic and political dominance.

This "greening" of the empire is reflected through four mechanisms: (1) Turning ecological crises into profitable opportunities: the EGD frames climate change as a market failure, solvable through carbon trading, private investment, and green finance. For example, the European Green Deal Investment Plan (EGDIP) encourages private capital to drive the green transition, ignoring structural inequalities in such "win-win" logic. (2) Portraying the EU as a 'moral' intervener: the EU sets sustainability standards for the world as a global leader, masking its economic self-interests and ignoring historical carbon debt. The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) imposes tariffs on non-EU countries, reinforcing trade inequalities while securing its privileged access to resources. (3) Building on a 'green' will to improve: epistemically, the EGD positions the EU as an expert, prescribing technical solutions that erase alternative ecological knowledge systems. For instance, the EU Green Taxonomy Regulation defines what qualifies as 'sustainable', shaping investment and land use policy in the Global South while excluding Indigenous and non-Western approaches. (4) Securitizing and consolidating the empire: the EU frames ecological breakdown as a security threat, justifying increased control over trade and resource extraction. The EU-Mercosur and EU-Indonesia Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) ensure cheap raw materials for the EU, reinforcing protectionist patterns in trade policy while creating global "green sacrifice zones" for its own climate security.

The EGD represents broader entanglements of neoliberal markets, capitalistic growth, colonial legacies, and techno-managerial epistemologies in the contemporary energy transition and climate governance frameworks. Similar dynamics can be observed in the U.S. Green New Deal (GND) and other energy transition programs expansively around the globe. If the energy concerns and climate crisis remain depoliticized, the capitalistic framing of efficiency and development remains prioritized, and the extracted countries, regions, and communities remain marginalized, "transition" is only a repetition of historical tragedy, without "just" in the front.

Building on the June Climate Talk for Just Transition, activists and campaigners expect that JTWP will yield a Belém Action Mechanism in November during COP30 in Belém, Brazil, facilitating the exchange of information with government officials at all levels who are pursuing a just transition. However, challenges persist: the Arab group and others resisted the removal of fossil fuels in the clean energy narration; the male-led government of Paraguay opposed wording on gender-based approaches to a just transition; Russia insists on including a reference to unilateral trade measures. These challenges lead to the key question: How can Just Transition be advanced?

If the state-led transition framework, like EGD, and international negotiation inevitably collude with governments, industries, and corporations that enact fossil-fuel-oriented, capitalistic, patriarchal, and extractive patterns, then true Just Transition should emerge in alternative arenas rooted in community, locality, indigeneity, and equity.

During the June Climate Meetings in Bonn, activists spanning from factory workers and waste-pickers to Indigenous leaders and feminist economists all gathered under the banner of “Just Transition Rising”, to foreground workers and communities on the frontlines of climate impacts in the transition policies. Italian workers from the GKN automotive factory transformed a mass lay-off into a worker-led movement for a just transition, with workers pooling their expertise in carbon-zero and non-extractive forms of production, which is diametrically opposed to the wasteful and profit-driven capitalistic model. The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of India (now expanding to neighboring Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) advocates for labor rights and climate resilience from the ground up. They set up the Livelihood Recovery and Resilience Fund and the Extreme Heat Income Microinsurance, covering 50,000 informal workers by 2024. The U.S. Energy Democracy Project provides activists with strategic tools to challenge corporate control over energy utilities, while calling for energy democracy. It emphasizes that an equitable and energy-just system requires deep relational organizing, cross-movement connectivity, and the prioritization of Black and Indigenous voices.

These examples are not sporadic or discrete events; they are echoing tides of authentic Just Transition that climate activists, critical scholars, and marginalized communities are looking for, fundamentally anti-neoliberal, anti-extractivist, and anti-colonial. It recognizes the political and social dimensions of climate change and energy use. It moves beyond market-based solutions and exploitative trade and finance mechanisms. It acknowledges and empowers knowledge systems of Indigenous and local communities. And it facilitates decentralized, community-led, and non-prescriptive alternatives for pluriversal futures.

About the author:

Shoutao Wu is a climate governance researcher at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. His work bridges environmental governance, decolonial theories, and epistemological pluralism to critically examine carbon markets and carbon offsetting mechanisms as instruments of neocolonial power. Though grounded in climate justice, his research engages broader global governance questions, particularly how contemporary institutions reproduce imperial, extractive, and settler-colonial logics. Informed by Indigenous studies, ecofeminism, and Global South scholarship, he explores relational, embodied, and place-based climate knowledge systems as pathways toward pluriversal governance.