Towards a just transition for all: Lessons from the pandemic

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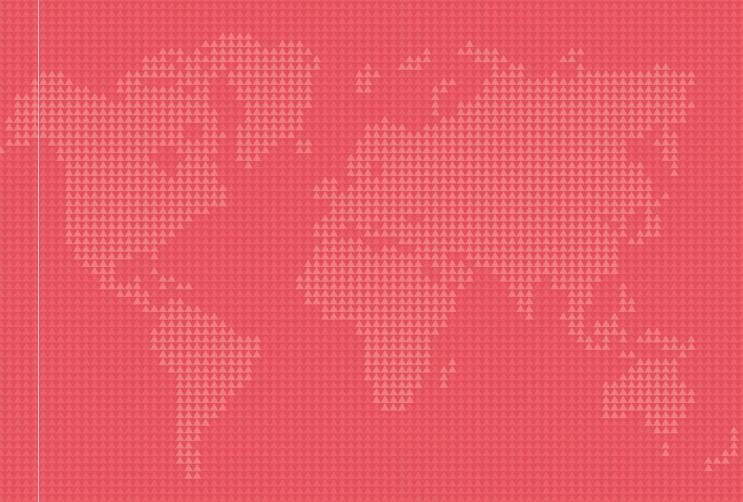Professor, Colorado State University, United States

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Introduction

Just transition has historically been associated with the environmental transition, initially with sectors such as logging and chemicals and subsequently with energy and climate change. More recently, the concept has expanded further to include manufacturing, Industry 4.0, food and biodiversity (TUCA 2020; Carrau, Forero and De Wel 2020; ETUI and ETUC 2021). In its general parameters this broadening is consistent with the International Labour Organization's *Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All* (ILO 2015).

Having said this and given the current situation with COVID, what would a just health transition look like? How would it compare to a just energy/climate transition? How can a "just transition for all" as outlined by the ILO (2015) and others be operationalized and implemented in practice? Can we overcome tensions between social and environmental objectives and adopt a combined eco-social approach towards transitions? Drawing on an analytical scheme developed by the Just Transition Research Collaborative (JTRC) (2018),[1] we provide a holistic, socio-ecological examination of just transitions which we illustrate with examples from energy and health. While we suggest that a just health transition is necessary we also argue that it should not be separated from a broader, more comprehensive eco-social transition project.

The pandemic has made health a prime candidate for exploring "just transition for all" for a variety of reasons. Around the world it has highlighted the need for more robust and accessible healthcare as well as for better occupational health and safety and more work-related rights within the health sector (see, for example, National Nurses United 2020). It has also affected employment in the sector as demand rose for some skills and dropped for others (Reilly 2020). Across the world offshoring, immigration and artificial intelligence/Industry 4.0 are driving profound changes within the health sector similar to those associated with manufacturing automation in the 1970s and 1980s and decarbonization today (Aluttis, Bishaw and Frank 2014; Bludau 2021). Changes in particular countries will have their own specific impacts. As Les Leopold, one of two people to first use the term "just transition"', commented at a 2020 webinar:

> Just transition is now moving into other areas where it's also critically needed. People are organizing for a single payer health care [in the United States]. We know that a couple of million people who push around paper [in insurance] and hospitals, many of them are women, lots of them are people of color, are going to lose their jobs if we go to single payer. We're not going to need 15 percent administrative costs when it can be done with six percent, or whatever it is, administrative costs. (Labor Network for Sustainability 2020)

[1] The JTRC convenes experts from academia and civil society to collectively map and analyse different understandings and narratives of just transition and provides an important contribution to the science-policy dialogue around it, offering policy recommendations for the transition to equitable low-carbon development. See www.unrisd.org/jtrc for more information.

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In the case of the United States, in fact, a just health transition is arguably as challenging as the energy transition, both in terms of employment and in terms of urgency.[2]

Broadening and deepening just transition

The JTRC's analytical scheme aims at examining just transitions in a manner that fuses the social and the ecological (JTRC 2018). To that end it employs the dimensions of breadth and depth to map transitions, in general, and just transitions, in particular. It then combines these two dimensions to provide a typology of just transitions in terms of their overall ambition. Our analytical scheme aims to map differences and similarities across transitions and just transitions, as well as capture the interfaces and tensions between them. We briefly summarize the analytical scheme here and add more clarifications, as necessary, throughout the main body of this article.

Breadth denotes the scale and scope of a policy while depth denotes its social and ecological priorities. What is the spatial and temporal scale of a policy and is it aligned with the transition at hand? Does the scope of the policy cover all affected, or is it limited to certain sectors, workers or aspects of the natural environment? Does the policy enhance social justice and the voice of labour and the communities most impacted? Does it promote a cleaner environment for all? An energy or health transition may be comprehensive in scale and scope but more or less socially or environmentally just. We know the adverse environmental impacts of fossil fuels. But that should not obscure the fact that the renewable energy sector is far less unionized than the fossil fuel sector while its supply chains and siting practices create significant environmental problems (Aljazeera 2020).

On the basis of breadth and depth we have developed a typology that differentiates policies in terms of their ambition (JTRC 2018; Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien 2005).[3] At one end are status quo policies that treat some of the symptoms of unjust transitions without modifying their causes. Managerial reforms aim to better control present and future crises in order to prevent further destabilization. Such were, for example, some of the financial management policies adopted in response to the Great Recession to stabilize the financial system (for an overview see Tooze 2018).

We distinguish these from structural reforms that cover a significant slice of the political economy while also modifying its rules (see, for instance, Bond 2008). Universal and

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[2] Given the ambitious proposals of the new US Administration and the centrality of healthcare in US politics over the last several decades we draw upon this country, particularly in illustrating ambition. Medicare for All (socialized healthcare) is a major and divisive issue within US society and labour (Labor Campaign for Single Payer Healthcare 2021). For the need for a just transition to achieve Medicare for All see DJDI 2021. However, we have sought to provide references to research and information that is applicable around the world.

[3] The typology reflects a range of policies and each category is better thought of as a cluster rather than a single type of policy. For the purpose of this contribution, policies consist of laws and associated implementation provisions.

socialized healthcare, for instance, was such a reform in many European countries after World War II and it could be so in the United States now. In addition to covering a vast number of people it also made healthcare a social right for all. By contrast, insurance-based healthcare is accessible to those that can afford it.

Transformative just transitions address all transitions and all those affected. They deepen and broaden the public sphere – which is not the same as enhancing the power of the State. Rather, the goal is a more egalitarian and democratic eco-social State and society. This is an important element of the JTRC's analytical scheme. An approach to just transitions that limits the possibility of an eco-social synthesis to those sectors in which nature is "apparent" perpetuates the myth that social and environmental policies are in separate realms. Over the past fifty or sixty years, labour environmentalism has challenged this divide, whether with respect to occupational health and safety, environmental health or sustainable development (Bennett 2007; Silverman 2004 and 2006; Räthzel and Uzzell 2013; Morena, Krause and Stevis 2019). The process towards an eco-social synthesis remains challenging but the debate has been engaged within the world of work (ETUI and ETUC 2021; TUCA 2020; Räthzel and Uzzell 2019).

Breadth

Scale

The spatiality and temporality of a transition, as well as a just transition proposal or policy, require empirical research. Transitions in general, and just transitions in particular, do vary even when driven by common forces such as automation. The final consumption of almost all products, whether energy or care, is largely local. But these are produced across production networks and associated commodity/supply chains that cut across national boundaries, creating and reshaping labour and communities along the way. In addition to commodity/supply chains, linkages are also created through corporate ownership. Multinational corporations in construction, hydropower or healthcare own subsidiaries that rely more on local than global supply chains. Finally, the impacts of consumption and production may be spread around the world along networks and chains that do not close the circle, such as by dumping health or electronic waste, or via geophysical processes, such as those causing climate change.[4]

The responses to the pandemic combine limited global scale policies facilitated by the World Health Organization (WHO) with national level policies. More so than energy, where some producer countries are very wealthy, the North–South inequalities in tracking, managing and recovering from the pandemic are very pronounced (Twohey, Collins and Thomas 2020; Gebrekidan and Apuzzo 2021). Yet, there is strong evidence that poorer countries

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[4]   By some measures the healthcare industry accounts for about 10 per cent of global emissions and is one of the largest sources of single use waste, often toxic (El Murr 2021; Eckelman and Sherman 2016).

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can develop effective local healthcare systems (Jensen, Kelly and Avendano 2021; Jones and Hameiri 2021). One aspect that distinguishes health from energy, however, is that there is nothing in health akin to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).[5]

What about temporal scale? This depends on whether we think of disasters and pandemics as exceptional events or as integral, if not fully predictable, elements of the society–nature nexus. If the latter, then the specific tactics and strategies in response to them must be embedded within longer-term and broader policies (DeBruin, Liaschenko and Marshall 2012). In fact, the existence of emergency agencies and disaster planning around the world suggests that this is already the case. Insurance schemes as well as military planning, for example, show that societies are willing to invest enormous resources in anticipation of crises. The absence or presence of framework policies that deal with labour and vulnerable communities, therefore, is a matter of political choice. The impacts of the pandemic on the broader political economy and the world of work – often accelerating existing transitions – are already the subject of debate (ILO 2021a; McKinsey Global Institute 2021).

Scope

The pandemic also forces us to reflect on the scope of just transitions – that is, who is affected by a transition and who is covered by policy responses to it. In the following paragraphs, we briefly explore scope within the health sector proper with respect to access to health; the connections between the health sector and the broader society; and the changes induced by the pandemic across the world of work.

In the United States and some other parts of the world the pandemic has made apparent the demographic diversity of the labour force in the health sector, as well as the need for just transitions and recoveries to include all workers. A just transition that focuses on physicians is both necessary and inadequate, as is an energy transition that focuses solely on the operators of coal-fired plants. The major difference is that automation has already transitioned most workers in the energy sector, while the number of workers in the health sector is likely to keep on growing until artificial intelligence, immigration and offshoring lead to deeper workforce transitions (Aluttis, Bishaw and Frank 2014; American Hospital Association 2019).

The pandemic has made apparent the maldistribution of exposure to the virus and access to healthcare across communities and countries (Jensen, Kelly and Avendano 2021). Living in close quarters, common amongst immigrants and the poor, aggravates infections. Being forced to work, whether classified as essential or afraid of losing employment, resulted in

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[5]   Notably, however, the ILO has adopted several Conventions with respect to occupational safety and health, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155), the Occupational Health Services Convention, 1985 (No. 161) and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187). Here we are not suggesting the creation of another forum like the UNFCCC but, rather, the strengthening of the WHO, as well as the ILO with respect to workers.

people working while infected. In fact, a number of people interviewed for the Just Transition Listening Project (JTLP 2021) recounted that employers used the designation "essential" to force even unionized and highly paid workers in refineries and utilities to work if they were asymptomatic. These inequities are not limited to the pandemic but are evident with respect to pollution and environmental health and are very pronounced in the industrializing Global South (Gardiner 2021).

The pandemic has shown that the health sector forms part of an interconnected and intricate web that provides the various lines of defence against COVID. If education and childcare facilities close, then many workers – mostly women – have to stay at home, aggravating gender inequality. If the supply chains of protective material, ventilators and vaccines break down, the work of healthcare workers will become dangerous. If a hospital, like a coal plant, closes, then the impacts on workers and communities are profound. In the United States, for instance, the local school districts depend on taxes from industrial and commercial installations. Any decline in taxes leads to resource and personnel cuts, mostly affecting poor districts and young and part-time teachers and staff.

What long-term changes may be induced by the pandemic (ILO 2021a; McKinsey Global Institute 2021)? Hybrid employment is a possibility resulting in less driving but higher energy bills, more flexibility but also more surveillance, greater family proximity but also tensions as domestic environments also act as workplaces. While such hybrid employment is very likely to develop in some sectors (especially services) it may also extend to workers who can remotely operate machinery. One development that seems irreversible – largely because it had started before the pandemic – is the reorganization and centralization of distribution and delivery systems.

Depth

A transition may cover all those affected, but that does not tell us what its social and ecological priorities may be. It can be largely social or largely ecological – reproducing the separation of humanity and nature. It can also fuse the two, but through a range of different instruments: from regulatory instruments to more market mechanisms such as carbon taxes or the "cap and trade" system for controlling carbon emissions and other forms of atmospheric pollution. An example of the former is the 1970 Clean Air Act in the United States, arguably one of the most successful environmental laws of all time (Gardiner 2021). It is not surprising that this and related Acts were adopted during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of very strong political fermentation in the United States.

Society

We can examine the societal provisions of a just transition in procedural and distributive terms, fully recognizing that the two are mutually constituted. In terms of procedure we can ask who has a voice in the shaping of laws and policies. Effective social dialogue gives

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the weaker more voice, tempering the voice of the stronger. On the other hand, dialogue without the possibility of some redistribution renders voice a formality.

A central issue with respect to healthcare is that it employs a lot of people across various occupational categories, many of them women or immigrants. While a definitive measure of the number of workers on the move is difficult to establish (Bludau 2021), based on available data from 86 countries, it is estimated that one out of eight nurses (13 per cent) was born or trained in a country other than the one in which they currently practise (WHO, International Council of Nurses, and Nursing Now 2020). Those people are neither unionized nor organized and do not enjoy adequate occupational health and safety standards, social protections or workplace rights (JTLP 2021). The key challenge, certainly in the United States, is to ensure improvement along all of these dimensions (Winant 2021). In short, there is a need for a "just transition into the future" and towards a more protected and empowered workforce, as well as "a just transition from the past" for those whose employment will be affected by technological innovations or the socialization of healthcare.[6]

Even amongst those who are unionized there is a need for stronger social dialogue. This was made apparent by the debate over whether frontline personnel dealing with COVID-19 patients are more vulnerable to infection, as argued by Global Nurses United, compared to personnel dealing with emergency procedures, a view supported by hospital associations (Global Nurses United 2020; Klompas, Baker and Rhee 2021; Jewett 2021). As Malinowski, Minkler and Stock (2015) have argued, unions can be considered public health institutions that significantly contribute to social and environmental health, whether in promoting the cessation of smoking or the prevention of workplace factors that cause asthma.

Social justice and voice cannot be limited to workers but must also cover frontline communities, at the very least (JTLP 2021). This is all the more so because better paid workers in polluting facilities tend to move away from the frontline communities where these are located, thus breaking any sense of common interests. On the other hand, housing near "cleaner industries", such as universities or hospitals, can be prohibitively expensive, forcing poorer workers to commute to work. What the pandemic underscores is that just transitions require stronger and broader social dialogue to include frontline communities which, as evidence indicates, were the ones most affected by the pandemic (Jensen, Kenny and Avendano 2021; JTLP 2021). But, of course, social equality also requires the massive redistribution of benefits and the reduction of harms for everyone.

Nature

In late 2019, Brian Kohler wrote a short review motivated by the report by the Global Commission on the Future of Work, *Work for a Brighter Future* (ILO 2019). His major argument was that IndustriALL, and labour in general, needs to fuse the three dimensions

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[6] In that vein it is worth noting that President Biden's American Jobs Plan (not adopted at this point) includes US$400 billion over the next eight years to upgrade elder care as well as the working conditions in it (White House, 31 March 2021).

of sustainable development in calling for just transitions in sustainable manufacturing and Industry 4.0 (Kohler 2019). In February 2021 the ETUI and the ETUC organized a conference entitled "Towards a New Socio-Ecological Contract" (ETUI and ETUC 2021). In what follows we highlight how the social and the ecological intersect, moving from what can be considered as interactions to what may be considered as a fusion of the two.

The pandemic has highlighted inequalities in occupational health and safety within the healthcare sector (Color of Change et al. 2021). A just health transition must certainly address these injustices. But is this a technical occupational health and safety (OHS) issue or is it a broader social and environmental health issue? The fusion between OHS and the environment has not been an easy one and it continues to divide workers, employers and administrators (Bennett 2007; Silverman 2004 and 2006). But from the early, and continuing, concerns about toxins to the current focus on climate change it is apparent that OHS is also an environmental health issue. For example, indoor air pollution is a major problem while the materials that people use to produce or work can be as harmful for them as for nature. This has long been recognized by the ILO Working Environment (Air Pollution, Noise and Vibration) Convention, 1977 (No. 148) (see also Olsen 2009).

Environmental health injustice is even more evident with respect to the causes that place people in harm's way, including the pandemic. The maldistribution of infections is driven by inequality, such as food and health insecurity or precarious employment. According to the WHO, over seven million people die from air pollution every year (Gardiner 2021). In decades past these were considered social injustices but we have increasingly come to recognize them as eco-social injustices. Food justice does not only call for enough food for everyone. It also calls for better working conditions for food workers as well as for agricultural practices that are good to ecosystems and other species. Health justice is about equal access to hospitals but also equal access to a good environment, whether that is nature proper or the elimination of toxins in what we consume. Energy justice is about access to energy and about just transition for fossil fuel workers but also the reduction of risks to humanity and nature from climate change.

Both humanity and nature are affected and modified by how we transform our world through production and consumption. Advocates of industrial ecology and ecological modernization would see this interface as a challenge to be solved by superior technology and innovations. Others see humanity as a scourge upon the planet (for varieties of perspectives see Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien 2005; Clapp and Dauvergne 2011). From an eco-social perspective, innovations that do not account for the mutual constitution of the social and ecological dimensions of our civilization are damaging some aspect of it through a "non-policy" whose impacts can be as powerful as those of an explicit policy – as the absence of global climate policy demonstrates.

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Ambition: An illustration from the United States

As we have noted, it is possible for a policy to be broad to the point where it covers all people and nature affected, but also socially inegalitarian and ecologically damaging. Using configurations of breadth and depth, therefore, we proposed (through the JTRC) four types/clusters of just transition policies – status quo, managerial reforms, structural reforms and transformative policies. We would like to illustrate this typology by drawing on current debates in the United States.

On 11 March 2021 the United States adopted the US$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan (on various US stimulus Acts see Casselman 2021). This massive plan is smaller than the March 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) adopted under former President Trump. In our view CARES was a status quo policy because it was limited to lessening despair, stimulating the economy and managing the pandemic (Wright 2021). It did not include any measures to deal either with the pandemic's long-term impacts on society and nature or in terms of planning to address pandemics in general. Interestingly, President Biden's Rescue Plan has motivated a debate over whether it marks the start of the most ambitious anti-poverty and social cohesion structural reform since the Great Society of the 1960s. These hopes are anchored on making some of the policy's provisions permanent – such as support for children and health workers. However, it appears unlikely that any of these policies will become permanent.

By distinction, a managerial reform would implement stronger and permanent measures, including how to deal with the next pandemic. The Great Recession, for instance, resulted in the adoption of permanent financial instruments to manage future recessions and stabilize the economy, albeit not in the direction of social equity or ecological health (Tooze 2018). The CARES and Rescue Acts have not set up any long-term arrangements to manage a future pandemic. For that we will need to look at the Administration's other policy proposals.

The main elements of the Administration's strategy are the American Jobs and American Families Plans (White House 2021a and 2021b). Combined they envision investing over US$4 trillion dollars to reform the physical and social infrastructure of the country as well as strengthening its green manufacturing capacity. Do these constitute a structural reform that is both impactful in the short term and creates the foundations for more transformative change in the longer term? This is where attention to politics is necessary. The obstacles to structural reform come from two quarters. First, the US Congress is marginally Democratic and support for exclusionary and discriminatory forms of nationalism – what is increasingly referred to as nativism – continues to grow within the Republican Party, as it is doing in a number of countries around the world. Second, and more relevant in terms of our argument here, opposition also comes from within the Democratic Party. A group of conservative Democrats is opposed to some of the current proposals while mainstream Democrats consider President Biden's proposals very ambitious and, in some cases, negotiable. And the Biden Administration, itself, has not called for universal healthcare – certainly a structural

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reform – nor for a Green New Deal – a potentially transformative policy. Rather it justifies its policies around unexamined growth and the United States regaining its competitive edge vis-à-vis China. And while it has placed environmental justice front and centre, it has not proposed an explicit and comprehensive just transition plan. So far, its transitional policies are limited to coal, remain fragmentary and employ an "all of the above" approach to energy that includes nuclear power and carbon capture and sequestration (CCS). Worth noting here is that questions of justice are much more prominent domestically and largely absent in the United States' global climate policies, including the fact that it has not yet signed onto the ILO's Climate Action for Jobs Initiative (ILO 2021b).

Given the current circumstances, what could move the United States in the direction of more profound changes? If the American Rescue Plan is successfully implemented and gains in popularity it could well shift the debate. The adoption of the American Jobs and Families Plans would also certainly change the political debate, as would the adoption of the Protecting the Right to Organize Act (White House 2021c). But for Medicare for All and the Green New Deal (which includes just transition) to be adopted there would have to be mobilizations similar to those that led to the New Deal of the 1930s and the Great Society policies of the 1960s.[7] That there is strong resistance to such a pathway is evidenced by the significant resources that the mainstream wing of the Democratic Party have devoted to counter the ascendant progressive wing and the formation of a political narrative that can challenge former President Trump's nativist populism (Fraser 2017).

Conclusions

Throughout the preceding pages, we have argued that just transitions are desirable for all, with the energy transition being particularly pressing. But leaving out the care sector – including but not limited to health, child and elder care, and education – would be tantamount to leaving out a substantial and growing part of the world of labour. Just transitions for all must include all sections of society and nature affected by unjust transitions. Privileging some over others breeds resentment and opposition. With respect to the society–nature nexus, it is important to reiterate that the "social" sectors unquestionably contribute to the unfolding ecological and climate crises. However, it is also essential to insist on the fact that they also play an important role in mitigating and adapting to them. Green transitions in services have both direct and indirect effects. They use up vast amounts of energy and other resources, as well as shape urban zoning and planning (as noted earlier, the healthcare sector alone accounts for 10 per cent of global emissions). At the same time, green transitions, including those that pertain to specific sectors such as health, care or education, drive profound changes in energy and manufacturing.

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[7]   The New Deal took place in two waves (1933–34 and 1935–36) and consisted of a number of policies. Notably, these were more beneficial to white males. The Great Society took place from 1964–68 and addressed race as well as the environment. Key environmental policies continued to be adopted in 1969 and 1970.

If the connections between society and nature are so important in sectors that we conventionally consider "social", then it makes sense to shift frames and recognize that all social practices are environmental, and simultaneously all environmental practices are social. It makes little sense to recognize that atmospheric pollution kills over seven million people a year, and harms countless more, without also acknowledging its underlying eco-social dynamics and root causes.

There are also strategic reasons why just transitions should be expanded. In many countries these sectors are central to the social welfare state. In other countries such as the United States, unionization of the service sector is existential for the world of labour and it is here that some of the most inspiring efforts are taking place. Leaving the service sector out of the just transition strategy is to leave out some of the most vibrant and important elements of the world of labour and, consequently, to narrow and weaken the alliances necessary to achieve just transitions for all.

Our central argument is that all transitions, and certainly the energy transition, should be just. When they are unjust, transitions, regardless of the sector or region, breed resentment and nativism, resulting in opposition to any kind of structural change. A proactive approach assumes that transitions are part of life and thus require an eco-social state and society, informed by the best practices of the social welfare state (Barry and Eckersley 2005; Koch and Fritz 2018). The world of labour must choose between sectoral and largely ad hoc transition programmes and a comprehensive and proactive just transition politics. Such a politics will require a great deal of initial effort but is likely to deliver more in the longer term.

We also recognize that transitions that are mandated by public policies, such as those associated with the environment, are more easily recognizable and thus legitimize the demand for justice. However, narrowly associating just transitions with publicly mandated transitions obscures the many transitions that are the result of corporate pressures, routinely connected with enabling, but less visible, public policies. A prime example of this are the many socially unregulated economic agreements that have shaped the global political economy since the 1970s. In our view, exempting "private policies" from just transition insulates them from democratic deliberation. The world of labour should be particularly supportive of an expanded and democratic public domain that treats corporate choices as the public practices that they are.

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