

Uneven and Combined Transitions: Energy, Justice and the Global South

Over the last decade, the just transitions literature has advanced a lively research agenda investigating how local-to-global efforts to shift towards a low-carbon future interact with and impact upon the workers, communities, and economies most directly affected (Wang and Lo 2021, Stark et al. 2023). The major aim of the proposed network is to analytically extend this literature by introducing the under-explored and under-theorised concept of uneven and combined transitions (UCT), with emphasis on learning and theorising from the global South.

Whereas much of the just transitions scholarship stresses fairness in distributing the costs and benefits of decarbonisation (Jasanoff 2018, Jenkins et al. 2018, Geels 2019, Williams and Doyon 2019, Kelly et al. 2020, Huang and Liu 2021), the concept of UCT firmly situates socio ecological change within the broader dynamics of global capitalism (Ashman 2009). It highlights how structural inequalities between regions, classes, and sectors are not incidental but constitutive of capitalist development. This perspective underscores that energy transitions will not unfold uniformly: green investment, job creation and possibly prosperity in some regions is inextricably linked to heightened marginalisation, polarisation and exclusion in others.

Analytically centring the global South within this framework entails recognising that global South experiences, theories and lenses are necessary to understand capitalist development globally. It also ensures the structural imbalances that function to reproduce geographies of power, influence and subordination across the historically constituted North-South divide remain in the foreground. What goes on in the global South is not only important and distinct from specific contexts of the global North, but offers a vital viewpoint for understanding the structure and dynamics of the world economy and the majority world (Wiegratz et al. 2023).

By foregrounding these asymmetries, the proposed network will advance a new body of cutting edge research to challenge overly normative, technocratic and/or universalist models of energy transition and instead stress the need for historically grounded, regionally sensitive understandings. It will also illuminate how local struggles for justice are entangled within global patterns of accumulation, dependency and uneven ecological burdens. In doing so, the proposed network will enrich just transitions scholarship by linking climate justice to questions of political economy, power, and global inequality, pushing the field toward more transformative and systemic understandings of what a just transition entails and how it might be achieved.

To contribute toward realising these overarching ambitions, the proposed network has three primary objectives:

1. Mobilise, nurture and support a global research network and community of scholars working around the concept of uneven and combined energy transitions;
2. Produce high quality regional studies research related to the problematic of uneven and combined energy transitions, with a focus on mentoring global South and early career researchers through this process;
3. Generate findings relevant for policymakers and civil society to strengthen just transition outcomes and highlight the associated challenges.

References

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