

Just Transition for the plastic value chain

Main messages

- A “just transition” in the plastics sector is similar to its application in the energy sector, emphasising social equity, environmental sustainability, and fairness in orchestrating a sustainable plastics value chain.
- The plastics industry is the foundation for millions of formal and informal jobs globally. Integrating “just transition” principles align with human rights, labour conventions, and climate agreements.
- Achieving a just transition requires consideration of material life cycle analysis, environmental sustainability, social equity, labour rights, and policy frameworks, with active and meaningful participation of affected stakeholders in decision-making processes.

Background

The concept of a “just transition” in the plastics sector, analogous to its application in the energy sector, signifies a strategic shift towards prioritising social equity and environmental sustainability in the planning and implementation of a sustainable plastics economy.¹ Over the last century, the concept has evolved from a union movement to a core ambition and governance strategy that explicitly links to the Sustainable Development Goals.² Just transition principles are instrumental in ensuring that initiatives aimed at mitigating plastic pollution are conducted in a fair, equitable and inclusive manner, safeguarding the livelihoods of affected communities and workers across the entire plastic value chain.³

Just transition for the plastic value chain

The plastics industry, valued in the hundreds of billions of dollars, spans diverse sectors and employs millions globally across the life cycle of plastic products. Ongoing changes in the economic worth of plastics and labour dynamics are influenced by global trends, sustainability initiatives, and policy developments.^{4,5} Like the energy sector, integrating just transition principles in the plastics industry can gain public support for transitioning away from fossil fuels and traditional plastic use, while reducing pollution burdens on vulnerable and marginalised communities.⁶

A just transition aligns with human rights, International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, and climate agreements,^{7,8} emphasising the need for diverse justice types, harmonisation, public support and participatory measures in an effective plastic treaty.⁹ Acknowledging the transboundary impacts of plastic production and subsequent waste management practises are also crucial for a just transition to fully address environmental and socio-economic injustices.¹⁰ While existing frameworks such as the Basel and Abidjan conventions progress, alignment with the ongoing efforts of the plastics treaty is essential. Despite initiatives like ILO’s Decent Work Agenda and domestic policies, tailored approaches based on regional and sectoral contexts are vital.¹¹

Lessons learned from other sectors

Effective just transition strategies across sectors hinge on inclusive stakeholder engagement, involving workers, communities, industry representatives, and policymakers to ensure diverse perspectives are considered.^{12,13} Prioritising capacity development and behavioural change is paramount, as it equips workers with skills for emerging sectors, preventing unemployment, and fosters a culture of sustainability.¹⁴ Robust social safety nets are crucial to support individuals and communities adversely affected by transitions,¹⁵ alongside considerations like job quality, healthcare, working hours, and gender balance.¹⁶

Furthermore, effective policy alignment and collaboration with the private sector are essential. Key variables influencing transition outcomes include policy timing, investment, international trade, production possibilities, labour flexibility, and wage elasticity.¹⁷ While generally small positive impacts on employment are identified, negative effects in income distribution are also observed, emphasising the importance of considering perceptions of groups affected alongside real data.¹⁸ These efforts encourage sustainable practices and contributions to the development of green industries for increased employment opportunities. Access to finance, including grants and loans, facilitates the adoption of just and sustainable practices, particularly in regions with limited financial resources. Additionally, international cooperation, recognising the global nature of environmental challenges, accelerates the transition process by sharing best practices and providing support to developing countries.

Barriers

- The need for industrial and sectoral policies that simultaneously address environmental, economic, and social sustainability requires intricate frameworks and coordination.
- Efforts to protect employment may not fully prevent job displacement, requiring sufficient resources for equitable re-skilling across different sectors and demographics.
- Initial investments are needed for industries to adopt sustainable practises and fair labour conditions.
- Developing necessary infrastructure and technology for sustainability – such as efficient recycling systems and alternatives to plastics – faces significant barriers, including insufficient waste management facilities and scalability issues within complex global supply chains.

Enablers

- Facilitates stakeholder engagement across sectors and worker organisations for the development of comprehensive policies.
- Helps safeguard the livelihoods of workers through proactive transition support.
- Promotes environmental and social responsibility for industry competitiveness, where aligning with just transition principles can contribute to positive public perception.
- Enables formal participation of informal worker groups. This involves providing access to municipal procurement processes, making business registration and tax regulations accessible and affordable, and collaborating with worker groups to formalise informal services.
- Improves job quality and worker benefits, including social protection schemes for informal workers. This involves collaboration with governments and civil society organisations to improve informal workers' access to essential services like healthcare, childcare, pension schemes, workers' compensation, and social security programs.

The table below outlines the language of the revised draft of the Intergovernmental negotiating Committee for a legal instrument to tackle plastic pollution, including in the marine environment (28 December 2023) and the simple language equivalent in relation to "Just Transition" (Part 12).

Revised zero draft text	Synopsis
Just Transition	
Option 1.1	Option 1.1
1. [Leaving no one behind,] Each Party shall promote and facilitate [, as per national circumstances and capabilities and relevant national regulation,] a fair, equitable and inclusive transition for affected populations, with special consideration for [for [Indigenous Peoples] and [local communities],] [waste pickers [and other workers in [plastic] [waste] value chains]] women [and vulnerable groups, including][impacted communities] children and youth, in the implementation of this instrument* [in line with the International Labour Organization Just Transition guidelines] [according to national social policies and circumstances] [, in the implementation of this instrument*] [, provided that means of implementation are available for developing countries]. This may include[, according to national circumstances]:	Shall facilitate [as per national capabilities] a fair, equitable and inclusive transition, with special consideration for [associated groups] women and children. This may include:
OPI Alt. In the implementation of this instrument*, each Party shall promote an equitable and inclusive transition for affected populations, with particular consideration for workers and [persons] [people] in vulnerable situations, within [its national jurisdiction; This may include:]	Shall promote an equitable and inclusive transition, with particular consideration for workers [and people] in vulnerable situations, [nationally]
1a. Designating a national coordinating [body] [mechanism] for engagement [and collaboration] with relevant stakeholders, including public authorities, [trade unions,] [workers association] [waste pickers,] non-governmental organizations[, Indigenous Peoples] and [local communities][and affected populations] [according to national regulations] [with the aim of data collection, monitoring, evaluation and national reporting on progress of just transition];	Designating a national [body] [mechanism] for engagement with stakeholders [with the aim of monitoring and national reporting];
1b. Enabling policies [and conditions][that integrate][to [ensure and] improve [as appropriate] income, opportunities and livelihoods for] [waste pickers and other workers in plastic value chains and] [impacted] [affected workers and] communities, including workforce training, [development and social programmes, enhancement of occupational health and safety measures] [according] [considering] to their needs and priorities;	Enabling policies [and conditions] [to improve income, opportunities and livelihoods for] [groups associated with plastic value chain] considering needs and priorities
1c. Incentivizing the development of skills and job opportunities across the plastic value chain, including for the development of reuse, repair, waste collection and sorting;	Incentivise skills and job opportunities across the plastic value chain

1d. Promoting a [clean, healthy and sustainable] [safe working] environment [and a strong social safety net] [for communities and workers] across [the value chain, including [workers] in the waste management sector] [the full lifecycle in respect of the promotion of fundamental human rights];	Promote a safe and healthy environment in the waste sector [and full lifecycle]
1e. [Improving working conditions [, occupational safety and health, and social protection] for [waste pickers and] workers] in the waste management sector [, including by providing legal recognition and protection to [waste pickers and other] [workers [and waste pickers]] in informal and cooperative settings and facilitating the formalization [of their associations or cooperatives [integrating them into local waste management systems]] [of their activities through appropriate socioeconomic integration measures]]];	Improving working conditions in the waste management sector [including legal protections] and facilitating formalisation
1f. [Integrating [waste pickers and other] workers in informal and cooperative settings into [a safe] plastics value chain, [including by requiring plastic product producers, recycling and waste management companies to integrate plastics collected and sorted by them into their operation schemes]]]; and	Integrating workers in informal and cooperative settings into the plastic value chain [including requiring industry to use plastics collected by them]
1g. [[Requiring] [Encouraging] a portion of the fees collected through EPR schemes to be used to improve infrastructure [and improve the] [,] livelihoods [, a strong social safety net,] and opportunities for, and develop the skills of, workers in the waste sector, including waste [pickers and other][workers] in informal and cooperative settings.]	[Requiring] [Encouraging] EPR fees to improve infrastructure and livelihoods of workers in the waste sector
Option 1.2	Option 1.2
2. [The measures taken to implement this provision shall be reflected in the national plan [communicated pursuant to [Part IV.1 on national plans]]].	[Measures taken shall be reflected in national plan [communicated]]
OP2 bis. Each Party should support policies to improve income, opportunities, and livelihoods for affected workers and communities in the transition to more circular economies for plastics, considering the needs and priorities of affected workers and communities.	Should support policies to improve income, opportunities, and livelihoods for affected workers and communities
OP2 ter. Within its jurisdiction, each Party shall encourage the consideration of socio-economic factors in determining the location, design, and construction of solid waste management facilities that manage plastic waste, with an aim of avoiding disproportionate and adverse impacts on [persons] [people] in vulnerable situations	Shall consider socio-economic factors in determining solid waste management facilities
OP2 quater. Each Party shall, in accordance with its domestic procedures, provide opportunities for members of the public to provide input on government plastic waste management decisions or measures	Shall allow public input on waste management measures
Option 2.1	Option 2.1
1. Each Party shall cooperate to promote and facilitate a fair, equitable and inclusive transition/pathways for affected Parties in the context of sustainable development, with special consideration to social and economic impacts for affected developing country Parties, in the implementation of this instrument*. Developed country Parties shall provide sufficient finance, technology transfer and capacity building support to affected developing country Parties, with the view to promote and facilitate the just transition of developing country Parties.	Shall facilitate a fair, equitable and inclusive transition for affected Parties, considering socio-economics, to provide finance, technology transfer and capacity building
Option 2.2	
2. Each Party shall promote and facilitate a fair, equitable and inclusive transitions/pathways for affected populations, with special consideration for women and vulnerable groups, including children and youth, in the implementation of this instrument*. including by, inter alia, enhancing institutional arrangements, enabling policies and conditions to improve the opportunities, capabilities and livelihoods of affected communities.	Shall facilitate a fair, equitable and inclusive transition, with special consideration for women and children, enhancing how institutions and policies support affected communities

Option 3.1 1. Each Party shall cooperate to promote and facilitate a fair, equitable and inclusive transition towards sustainable development for developing country Parties, in the implementation of this instrument*. Developed country Parties shall provide sufficient finance, technology transfer and capacity building support with the view to promote and facilitate the just transition of developing country Parties.	Option 3.1 Shall facilitate a fair, equitable and inclusive transition towards sustainable development for developing country Parties , providing finance, technology transfer and capacity building
Option 3.2 2. Each Party could promote and facilitate a fair, equitable and inclusive transition with special consideration for women, children and youth in the implementation of this instrument. including by, inter alia, enhancing institutional arrangement, enabling policies and conditions to improve the opportunities, capabilities and livelihoods of affected communities.	Option 3.2 Could facilitate a just transition with special consideration for women and children, enhancing how institutions and policies support affected communities
Option 3.3 3. The measures taken to implement this provision might be reflected in the national plan.	Option 3.3 Measures might be reflected in national plan

Resources

- Reducing waste towards a just transition: Work, labour, and value in the informal recycling chain, with evidence from Turkey (ILO, 2023): https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---gjp/documents/publication/wcms_905814.pdf
- IAWP's Vision for a just transition for waste pickers under the UN Plastics treaty: https://globalrec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/english_position-paper_IAWP-vision-just-transition_resolution150ppi.pdf
- Initiating engagement on just transition policy: a blueprint (LSE, 2023): <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/news/initiating-engagement-on-just-transition-policy-a-blueprint/>
- Just Transition of the workforce, and the creation of decent work and quality jobs (UNFCCC): <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Just%20transition.pdf>
- Implementation of just transition and economic diversification strategies: a compilation of practices from different countries: <https://unfccc.int/documents/624596>
- Just transition beyond the energy sector (ADB, 2021): <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/746406/adb-brief-195-just-transition-beyond-energy-sector.pdf>
- Building a circular plastics economy with informal waste pickers: Recyclate quality, business model, and societal impacts (Gall, 2020): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2020.104685>
- Waste pickers in the informal economy of the Global South: included or excluded? (Coletto and Bisschop, 2017): <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-01-2016-0006>
- ILO Just Transition Finance: Pathways for banking and insurance, complimented by the Just Transition Finance Tool: https://www.unepfi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Just-transition-finance_Pathway-for-Banking-and-Insurance.pdf; https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_860182.pdf
- Climate Investment Fund: Just transition planning toolbox: <https://cif.org/just-transition-toolbox/home>
- Just Transition Centre (International Trade Union Confederation): <https://www.ituc-csi.org/just-transition-centre-599>
- Best practises for just transition for the coal sector (India, 2023): <https://www.cmpdi.co.in/sites/default/files/2023-05/Best%20Global%20Practices%20for%20Just%20Transition%20in%20Coal%20Sector%20-%20CMPDI.pdf>
- Strengthening Gender Justice in a Just Transition: A Research Agenda Based on a Systematic Map of Gender in Coal Transitions (Walk, 2021): <https://doi.org/10.3390/en14185985>

Global case studies/projects

- Value Addition to Plastic Solid Wastes: Informal Waste Collectors' Perspective (Mwanza, 2019): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.promfg.2019.04.048>
- Managing plastic waste in East Africa: Niche innovations in plastic production and solid waste (Oyake-Ombis, 2015): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2015.03.019>
- The cycle of plastic waste: An analysis on the informal plastic recovery system in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Bjerkil, 2005): <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/242601>
- The true cost of solving the plastic waste challenge in developing countries: The case of Ghana (Bening, 2022): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.129649>
- The Cycle of Solid Waste: A Case Study on the Informal Plastic and Metal Recovery System in Accra (Gugssa, 2012): <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A585668&dswid=-9214>

Pro-poor Public Private Partnership model (SWaCH), India, to bridge the gap between the informal waste sector and municipal waste-collection services for door-to-door collection.

Gender Equality for Development (GEfD), Norway, is a technical cooperation programme that aims at capacity and institutional development, helping share this experience in projects around the world funded by Norway.

Inclusive Waste Management: Clean Oceans through Clean Communities (CLOCC) project, Indonesia is a community and network driven programme with ISWA and Norad. The project is engaging stakeholders and providing training and support through 3 work packages ((i) waste management training, (ii) waste management plans and (ii) support programme for improved waste value chains.

Preventing plastic in Nepal's rivers by strengthening the informal sector (RiPL)

Nutritional empowerment: Kyari to Kitchen, India, is an urban farming project that trains women waste pickers to farm and grow their own food.

Chitan's no child in trash programme, India, provides education, awareness and health checks among parents and children.

Way to zero waste schools, India, through Shivangi Sultania, Centre for Development Communication (CDC), teaches children about the current waste system and how it can improve towards zero waste.

Just Transitions in South Africa: A Case Study by the Climate Investment Funds (UNFCCC).

Developmental States and Sustainability Transitions: Prospects of a Just Transition in South Africa (Swilling, 2015): <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2015.1107716>

Understanding just transitions in coal-dependent communities: Case Studies from Mpumalanga, South Africa, and Jharkhand, India (CSIS, 2021): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-just-transitions-coal-dependent-communities>

Livelihood opportunities for a Just Transition in Jharkhand, India (Climate trends, 2023): <https://climatetrends.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/climate-trends-EY-report.pdf>

Just Transition Development Plan of lignite areas (Greece, 2020): https://www.sdam.gr/sites/default/files/consultation/Master_Plan_Public_Consultation_ENG.pdf

Four case studies on Just Transition: Lessons for Ireland (Ireland, 2020): https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3694643

Latrobe Valley and Gippsland Transition Plan (Australia, 2023): <https://lva.vic.gov.au/transition/plan>

Further reading

^{3,10} O'Hare, P., Nøklebye, E., Stoett, P., Korsten, K., 2023. Policy Brief: Towards a Just Transition Away from Plastic Pollution. Zenodo.

^{9,11,14} ILO, 2022. Just Transition Policy Brief. International Labour Organisation.

¹⁶ GRID-Arendal, 2022. A Seat at the Table: The Role of the Informal Recycling Sector in Plastic Pollution Reduction, and Recommended Policy Changes. GRID-Arendal.