

Time is running out

# COP30: The moment to make Just Transition work

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Bonn, 10 November 2025. COP30, which begins today, marks ten years since the Paris Agreement, when countries pledged to keep global warming below 1.5°C. Yet, two years after the world 'took stock' of its limited progress on emissions reductions, only one-third of new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)—countries' climate pledges—support a transition away from fossil fuels. Many countries — including major emitters such as the EU and China — did not submit their updated contributions until last week, while some have yet to do so.

The Paris Agreement's preamble recognises “the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs” as essential to climate action. At this year's COP, aligning this goal with fair outcomes for all people has never been more urgent. This is the task of the Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP) under the UNFCCC, whose mandate expires next year at COP31.

Since its creation at COP27 and formal adoption at COP28, the JTWP has focused on “discussions of Just Transition pathways” to achieve the Paris goals through dialogues and roundtables. These debates have been hampered by divides between high-income and lower-income countries over what a global Just Transition should look like. The former have tended to prioritise energy-sector decarbonisation, workforce adaptation, and climate resilience. The latter have advocated for a more comprehensive, multilateral one, grounded in equity, climate justice, and the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities. These differences mirror tensions in both research and policy debates, where fundamental questions around Just Transition of what, for whom, and by whom remain unresolved.

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The ILO’s Guidelines for a Just Transition provide an important reference point, emphasising decent work and the greening of economies. Yet, Just Transition efforts worldwide have so far been fragmented and misaligned. This can lead to social backlash against climate policies. In Europe, for example, the challenge lies less in climate denial and more in low trust in governments, given a general neglect of social justice issues in climate policy. Without meaningful participation of communities and tangible improvements in livelihoods, the social licence for ambitious climate action risks further erosion.

Time is running out for the JTWP. The June Bonn negotiations produced an informal note outlining “options for further implementation”, including possible “new institutional arrangements” such as a toolbox, guiding framework, global platform, or mechanism. In response to the JTWP’s limited progress over the years, civil society has proposed the Bélem Action Mechanism for a Global Just Transition, an initiative that could finally offer the guidance countries need. As the JTWP reconvenes, two issues must be addressed in any negotiated governance toolbox.

First, while the informal note “recognises the potential for synergies with the Rio Conventions and the SDGs,” it stops short of committing to the 2030 Agenda or explicitly integrating the SDGs into its draft

note. This is a major omission. A genuine Just Transition cannot be confined to energy-sector decarbonisation or emissions cuts alone. It must also tackle poverty eradication, integrated resource management, social protection, and climate adaptation. With SDG implementation lagging and only five years left to meet their targets, failure to embed the 2030 Agenda into Just Transition governance risks deepening global policy fragmentation. To be effective, any JTWP toolbox must institutionalise policy coherence as a guiding principle to maximising synergies and minimise trade-offs. This is imperative to deliver multidimensional, multisectoral transitions that align national social and environmental goals with global frameworks.

Second, the JTWP should establish a dedicated forum to discuss means of implementation and finance. While this may go beyond its current mandate, this is vital to lay the groundwork for a credible financing framework. The shortcomings of traditional climate finance are already evident in the Just Energy Transition Partnerships first launched at COP26. These multilateral deals between high-income countries and coal-dependent, middle-income nations have been criticised for being underfunded, loan-based, and for undermining procedural justice in recipient countries. The United States’ recent withdrawal further undermines their credibility. This places greater responsibility on the JTWP to pave the way for future debates on financing—ensuring that any global Just Transition toolbox is ultimately built on fair, predictable funding and robust accountability mechanisms.

With the Brazilian Presidency naming the JTWP as one of its top priorities, there is now fresh impetus to strengthen its foundations, align climate action with sustainable development and equity and ensure the JTWP becomes a pillar - not a footnote—of global climate governance. Doing so will require courage from negotiators to move beyond rhetoric, commitment from high-income countries to honour their responsibilities, and collaboration across sectors. COP30 could be remembered as the moment the world gave real meaning to ‘Just Transition’, or as another missed opportunity in a decade already defined by delay.