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POLICY PAPER

Towards a people-centered just transition

The role of cities in advancing the
Just Transition Work Programme

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Past climate actions have not gone far enough in advancing fairness and inclusion by ensuring that benefits are accessible to all. Those most affected by climate risks are often sidelined, reinforcing structural inequalities in the short term, and political disconnect and opposition in the longer term. This has been highlighted in the UNFCCC Just Transition Work Programme. Its success will depend on the ability to connect ambition to everyday realities, particularly in urban contexts.

We therefore recommend using the Just Transition Work Programme to strengthen coordination of just transition principles across levels of government, with a specific focus on integrating the experiences and needs of cities:

For (supra)national policymakers



- Integrate just transition principles and establish horizontal coordination mechanisms
- Engage local governments in NDC development
- Empower local governments with the means of implementation

For COP30 parties and stakeholders



- Advance the Just Transition Work Programme from dialogue to delivery
- Recognize and leverage the key role of subnational governments

For international cooperation and donors



- Embed clear equity requirements in funding programs
- Move beyond a narrow focus on emission reductions

Introduction

As the world gathers at the UN Climate Change Conference COP30 in Belém to assess progress and raise collective ambition in the implementation of the Paris Agreement, one fact is increasingly clear: Cities are central to achieving global climate goals. Urban areas are home to over half the world's population and account for the majority of global emissions¹. Urbanization is expected to continue at a rapid pace, with around 68% of the world's population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, the vast majority of this growth taking place in Asia and Africa². More than this, cities are where the consequences of climate change are already deeply felt and where some of the most ambitious and inclusive responses are emerging.

Accelerating climate change mitigation and adaptation at every level is more urgent than ever. It has been increasingly recognized that a people-centered just and equitable transition is a key requirement for making climate action viable in the long run. Yet climate efforts continue to fall short when it comes to addressing inequality and exclusion. Too often, climate programs reward high-consumption lifestyles. Those most affected by climate risks, such as low-income households and populations in underserved districts, are often sidelined. This not only reinforces structural inequalities but also generates disconnect and opposition that can slow down or derail the transition altogether. Moreover, when disadvantaged and underserved communities are left behind, society as a whole becomes less resilient and less effective in achieving lasting climate progress.

To succeed, climate action must go beyond reducing emissions. It must also advance fairness and inclusion by ensuring that its benefits are accessible for all³. As the governance level closest to community needs, local governments have a unique opportunity to design and deliver context-specific climate policies that are not only ambitious but also equitable and in line with

local just transition priorities. By embedding social justice into the heart of local climate strategies, they can ensure that the benefits of the transition, such as cleaner air, affordable energy, and more resilient infrastructure, reach those who need them most.

The [Just Transition Work Programme](#) under the UNFCCC has put considerations of equity and participation at the centre of implementing the Paris Agreement. Following its adoption at COP27, the on-going dialogues emphasized the importance of inclusive policy-making and participatory approaches that protect livelihoods, strengthen ownership and resilience. While much of this conversation has centered on national policy and labor transitions, its success will depend on the ability to connect ambition to everyday realities, particularly in urban contexts.

This paper responds to that need: Building on the experience of implementing equitable climate action at the local level, it highlights that local governments are key agents in delivering a people-centered just transition. To leverage this potential and promote equity outcomes in climate action, we recommend using the Just Transition Work Programme to strengthen the coordination across levels of government, integrate just transition principles into national climate frameworks and strengthen the means for an inclusive and effective implementation.

Developed as part of the [INCLU:DE project](#) on just and inclusive climate action in German cities, this policy paper is based on lessons from Germany, complemented by experiences from international exchanges with peers in Europe, North America, East Asia, and Latin America⁴. Recognizing that each example reflects distinct urban governance contexts, the reflections and recommendations should not be read as one-size-fits-all solutions but as inspiration and guidance to promote just and inclusive climate action globally.

1 Lwasa (2022).

2 Ibid.

3 Including related co-benefits such as sustainable economic development, economic participation, and poverty eradication

4 While ICLEI represents both local and regional governments, this paper focuses specifically on the role and experiences of local governments - particularly cities - as key actors in advancing climate justice and inclusion. Developed in the context of the INCLU:DE project, the recommendation to "recognize and leverage the key role of local governments within the Just Transition Work Program" extends beyond the [Local Governments and Municipal Authorities Constituency \(LGMA\) COP30 Joint Position](#), as it explicitly focuses on local governments and stresses the need to leverage their capacities as active drivers of just and inclusive transitions



Principles of Just and Inclusive Climate Action

EQUITY: Recognizing that people and communities have different starting points, equity means allocating resources and support according to specific needs. It requires removing systemic barriers, addressing historic disadvantages, and transforming structures that perpetuate inequality.

INCLUSIVITY: Ensuring meaningful participation of all relevant stakeholders in climate decision-making, particularly those most affected by climate change. Inclusive processes actively center underrepresented voices, including low-income communities, Indigenous peoples, and youth.

JUSTICE: Upholding inalienable rights and societal norms for all individuals. In the climate context, this involves addressing the interconnected dimensions of environmental, social, and economic injustice, and ensuring that no group bears a disproportionate share of climate impacts or transition burdens.

JUST TRANSITION: Supporting workers, communities, and regions as economies shift away from fossil fuels and high-emission industries. Rooted in labor and trade union movements, Just Transition principles call for policies that protect livelihoods, promote decent work, and address the historic responsibilities of industrial development. Increasingly understood in a wider sense to include not only economic considerations, but also interconnected social, environmental, and governance priorities, recognizing the lived realities and needs of affected communities.

Local insights on just and inclusive climate action

Over the course of the INCLU:DE project, we have worked closely with cities to design and implement local climate programs that place equity and inclusion at their core. From socially accessible subsidies for balcony solar panels to neighborhood-level engagement and strategic efforts to institutionalize equity in climate governance, participating cities have actively explored how to embed just and inclusive climate action into day-to-day practice and decision-making.

A key lesson has been that many municipal climate and energy departments are committed to making their policies more socially equitable, but need to be equipped with the **tools, resources, and political mandates** to do so. Financial constraints remain a major challenge. When funding is tight, efforts that go beyond core mitigation targets, such as inclusive planning or targeted support for disadvantaged groups, are often seen as additional rather than essential. This makes it more difficult to maintain or scale socially just approaches, even when the individual willingness exists. It underscores the need to reframe the narrative: Equity and inclusion are not optional; they are vital to long-term effectiveness, public support, and the broader co-benefits of climate action.



Community engagement is essential and requires resources. Local governments in the project each reworked *existing* climate measures to make them more socially responsive. However, several reflected that this approach can be limiting. To truly design inclusive climate policies, city officials first need to understand the needs and barriers different communities are facing, particularly those who experience structural disadvantages and are often sidelined by traditional climate programs. With this

prior understanding, local governments are better positioned to prioritize effective measures and design programs in ways that include early and meaningful involvement from affected residents. Deep understanding of community needs requires strong participation and stakeholder engagement. Yet, these processes are often under-resourced or treated as secondary to technical planning. Establishing meaningful relationships with communities takes institutional commitment, dedicated capacity, and, above all, time - all of which are again constrained by financial limitations.

Efforts to integrate equity across municipal departments also face institutional barriers. **Siloed responsibilities, short planning cycles, and a narrow focus on carbon emissions** all make it difficult to prioritize equitable approaches. Even where political will exists, national funding frameworks and success metrics rarely account for social (co-)benefits. As a result, there is limited space for experimentation or longer-term investment in equity-focused solutions. For example, many grant programs and funding criteria prioritize short-term reductions in carbon emissions or quantifiable outputs, leaving limited room to fund climate

initiatives focused on social inclusion, community participation, or addressing structural inequalities.

To shift the focus and address the barriers described, narratives that move beyond narrow emissions-reduction targets are important. Such **narratives emphasize long-term perspectives and highlight co-benefits** such as improved health, enhanced quality of life, and expanded economic opportunities. Ultimately, these efforts can help to gain broader public support and strengthen democratic resilience, both of which are essential for sustaining political continuity throughout the transition process.

At the same time, there is a lack of clarity about what just and inclusive climate action entails. Given the wide variation in social and political contexts, concepts of justice and inclusion differ across places.

What cities need is **clearer guidance⁵, sustained funding, and national and global support mechanisms** that allow them to prioritize equity as a central pillar of the climate transition.

Scaling local lessons to global relevance: The Just Transition Work Programme

The [Just Transition Work Programme \(JTWP\)](#) under the UNFCCC holds the promise to develop such guidance, coordination and implementation support. Formally adopted in 2022 at COP27 and defined further at COP28, the JTWP represents an important step toward embedding equity, rights, and social dialogue into international climate cooperation. It recognizes that the shift to a low-carbon economy should not undermine workers' livelihoods, social cohesion or community resilience. Instead, it seeks to make just transition principles visible across all levels of climate action, including in Nationally

Determined Contributions (NDCs), long-term low-emission development strategies (LT-LEDs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and related national and subnational policy frameworks that support implementation⁶.

The JTWP opens the door for a broad, inclusive understanding of just transition, highlighting holistic, bottom-up and whole-of-society approaches. Such an understanding acknowledges the central role of local governments in delivering socially fair and climate-resilient futures. By integrating the experiences and

⁵ There is an ongoing debate around the tension between the need for shared global principles and the importance of local flexibility and agency, see Stanley Center for Peace and Security (2025) and Climate Action Network (2025). Many stakeholders support establishing common guidelines in a 'Global Mechanism' following the JTWP to ensure coherence, accountability, and access to finance, while others caution that overly prescriptive frameworks could limit local agency and context-specific interventions. An approach that integrates top-down and bottom-up approaches is crucial - one that sets universal principles of equity, participation, and rights, but allows countries and cities to define how these are applied in line with their specific social and economic realities.

⁶ UNFCCC (2024).

needs of cities into its processes, the JTWP could help to elevate the importance of local action, unlock new avenues of international support, and strengthen the policy coherence between national climate targets (such as NDCs) and the everyday realities of implementation⁷.

Concretely, recent developments at the UNFCCC's mid-year climate talks in Bonn (SB62) reinforce this broader and more inclusive framing. Negotiators agreed on a first consolidated draft decision and informal note for the Just Transition Work Programme, an important step toward translating principles into practice. The outcome underlines growing recognition that a just transition must address not only national labour and industrial challenges, but also the social, environmental, and governance realities faced by local actors⁸. Importantly, the Bonn discussions placed greater emphasis on inclusion, equity, and context-specific support, calling for just transition pathways that reflect the needs of diverse groups such as Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and informal workers, and for stronger links between high-level planning and grounded, community-level implementation.

Still, key questions remain unresolved. These include how to ensure that financial and technical support actually reaches local governments and communities, and how to embed rights-based principles such as gender equality, Indigenous rights, and decent work into concrete policies and programmes. Another key challenge is how to navigate trade-offs between climate goals and development priorities, particularly in settings where historical barriers to development persist alongside limited resources, institutional capacity, or political will.

As COP30 approaches, there is potential for the Work Programme to move from dialogue to formal decision-making, from agenda-setting towards delivery. This includes clarifying its future institutional arrangements (as the current mandate runs only until 2026), and deciding whether and how to establish a permanent mechanism. Other priorities will include mobilizing adequate funding for local implementation, and putting in place clear

mechanisms to monitor progress, involve affected communities, and ensure that decisions reflect a diversity of voices and interests. Urban stakeholders from different regions will need to play a key role in this process by articulating their specific needs, priorities, and capacities, and by demonstrating how just transition principles can be realized in practice⁹.

To support this, stronger links between the JTWP and municipal realities are essential. This means recognizing cities as central actors in transition planning and implementation, enabling better coordination across governance levels, and ensuring that finance mechanisms are accessible, flexible, and responsive to local justice concerns. While the lessons drawn from the INCLU:DE project reflect primarily the experiences of German cities, they also point to broader local needs, such as a shared vision, institutional commitment, and reliable financial support.



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7 Coleman (2025).

8 Kuehl (2025).

9 Stanley Center for Peace and Security (2025).

Leveraging the Just Transition Work Programme and multi-level governance to enhance NDC ambition and implementation

A concrete pathway to apply these learnings is through the integration of just transition principles into the development and implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). As countries finalize and submit their 2025 NDCs in the lead-up to the upcoming COP30¹⁰, the JTWP presents a timely and relevant framework to support the effective and equitable implementation of these climate commitments.

While NDCs outline *national* plans to reduce emissions and adapt to climate impacts, their development and delivery can benefit greatly from closer collaboration with local governments. Not only because they are responsible for implementing climate measures on the ground¹¹, but particularly because they are in a privileged position to ensure that equity considerations and community needs are consistently included. **This is where the JTWP can add value.**

By encouraging Parties to integrate just transition principles into NDC implementation, the JTWP can help to bridge national ambition with local realities¹². This includes:

- **Promoting inclusive consultation**, by encouraging countries to involve local governments and relevant groups such as Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and informal workers in the rollout and monitoring of NDC measures.
- **Focusing on social co-benefits**, by ensuring NDC implementation supports decent jobs, health, poverty eradication and quality of life, especially at the local level.
- **Targeting support to disadvantaged groups**, by directing funding and technical assistance to those most affected by the transition, such as low-income households and informal workers.

The relevance of this approach is clear when looking at insights from the INCLU:DE project. Across participating German cities, local climate departments showed strong commitment to equity but faced practical constraints: limited funding, siloed responsibilities, and short-term planning cycles. Social inclusion efforts, such as community engagement or targeted support for low-income households, were often sidelined rather than treated as essential elements for long-term success. Without institutional backing or dedicated resources, many city officials struggled to scale or even continue these efforts.

By promoting just transition principles as a core part of how NDCs are implemented, the JTWP can shift this dynamic. It can support the integration of equity-related commitments into NDCs, directing direct attention to inclusivity measures and dedicated support for disadvantaged groups.

Looking ahead, the JTWP can also inform the next round of NDCs, expected around 2030¹³. It lays important groundwork for more participatory, inclusive, and locally informed commitments in the next cycle. Expanding the definition of ambition to include equity, participation, and long-term social sustainability would strengthen both the legitimacy and effectiveness of climate measures¹⁴.

Ultimately, cities play a critical role in both implementing and shaping just transition pathways. But for this potential to be realized, they must be meaningfully engaged in national planning processes: not only as implementers, but as co-creators of more just and inclusive climate action.

10 UNFCCC (2025).

11 Ranalder et al. (2025).

12 Lee and Baumgartner (2022).

13 Naidoo et al. (2024).

14 UNFCCC 2023.

INCLU:DE recommendations for COP30 and beyond

To ensure coordinated efforts towards just and inclusive climate action, and to fully leverage the Just Transition Work Programme across national and local climate frameworks, the following policy measures are recommended for relevant stakeholders at all levels:



For (supra)national policymakers

- **Integrate just transition principles**, plans and actions into NDCs and climate plans to align climate and equity goals in long-term development processes.
- **Establish horizontal coordination mechanisms**, such as inter-ministerial working groups or national just transition taskforces, to align climate, social and economic policies.
- **Ensure meaningful engagement of local governments in the development and implementation of NDCs** and related policy frameworks, to guarantee that climate actions reflect community realities and support inclusive, effective transitions.
- **Empower local governments with the means of implementation, including political mandates, legal authority, targeted funding, and technical support** tailored to local needs, so they are equipped to spearhead equitable climate action through inclusive policy-making and community engagement.



For COP30 parties and stakeholders

- **Advance the Just Transition Work Programme from dialogue to delivery**, defining clear outputs, timelines and mechanisms to operationalize just transition implementation support for all stakeholders under the UNFCCC.
- **Recognize and leverage the key role of local governments** for the delivery of holistic, people-centered just transitions in line with local realities in the Just Transition Work Programme.



For international cooperation and donors

- **Embed clear equity requirements in funding programs** to ensure that resources support just transition goals, prioritizing projects that actively engage local governments to deliver inclusive transitions on the ground.
- **Move beyond a narrow focus on emissions reductions** by adopting evaluation approaches that acknowledge the complexity of measuring equity outcomes and the longer timeframes these impacts may require to materialize.

Social justice is a key enabler of ambition. Framing climate action around long-term social, economic, and democratic benefits can help to build political continuity and local ownership. Channeling the collective spirit of the 'Mutirão'¹⁵, COP30 has the potential to promote collaboration across levels and stakeholders to ensure that the vision of an inclusive transition becomes reality, delivering tangible benefits for all.

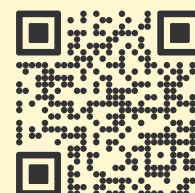
15 COP30 Presidency (2025).

INCLU:DE - Just and inclusive climate action in German cities

INCLU:DE - Just and inclusive climate action in German cities is implemented by ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability and supported by Stiftung Mercator. The project supports local climate measures and fosters dialogue exchanges to better understand what it needs to generate positive equity outcomes for local residents. A specific emphasis is placed on addressing challenges like fair and equitable resource distribution and benefits allocation, while ensuring that GHG reduction goals are not being compromised.

The cities of Bonn, Dortmund, Essen, Heidelberg and Ludwigsburg have joined the INCLU:DE project to improve social justice considerations in their local climate initiatives, spanning different areas such as energy, mobility, housing and urban development. Collaboration with international frontrunner cities Almada, Kaohsiung, Malmö, Rosario, and San José in the field of just and inclusive climate action ensures that best practices can be mainstreamed across local governments.

Learn more: <https://sustainablejustcities.eu/include>



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