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# THE SECOND DOLOMITE CONFERENCE ON THE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

OCTOBER 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> 2023

*PSG 4.  
ENERGY TRANSITION  
AS A LEVER OF SOCIAL  
JUSTICE:  
HOW CAN WE MAKE  
THE CLIMATE CHANGE/  
ENERGY TRANSITION  
AN AGENDA FOR ALL?*



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*Actions Beyond Words*

## PSG 4

### ENERGY TRANSITION AS A LEVER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: HOW CAN WE MAKE THE CLIMATE CHANGE/ ENERGY TRANSITION AN AGENDA FOR ALL?

#### VISION STARTING POINT

The past years have been marked by extreme weather events: 2022 recorded unprecedented droughts, forest fires, heat waves and a drastic lowering of the level of the Antarctic Sea ice; in 2022, Europe was hit by a drought that might be the worst in 500 years. the World Health Organization<sup>1</sup> estimated that in 2021 climate events resulted in hundreds of fatalities and affected almost half a million people. The war in Ukraine and the energy crisis that followed raised even more awareness on how human/national security, sustainable energy sources and climate change are closely intertwined issues.

Climate change is affecting more and more people and the urgency of the issue is becoming increasingly clear<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, studies and worldwide surveys prove that **climate change and the energy transition are still not on top of the agenda**, either for politicians or the world's public opinion. A survey conducted by Ipsos in 2021<sup>3</sup>, actually, shows that the issue is certainly not neglected by the global public opinion – but it is not a priority either: it was ranked fifth in the list of issues that respondents saw as priorities, after the cost of living, coronavirus, poverty and inequality and the healthcare system.

**50%** of respondents thought that priority should be given to the **environment**, even though it might cause job losses or slow down the economic growth, while 35% of them claimed that economic growth and jobs should have the priority even though it might be harmful for the environment. The missing piece of the puzzle is: **how can social justice and energy transition be put together**<sup>4</sup>? Does it have to be a zero-sum game, or **can we eliminate the trade-off between sustainable growth and social justice**?

Climate change and social justice are strongly interconnected issues and the global debate on the energy transition should be focusing on that equation.

Some specific groups of the world's population are more vulnerable than others to the impact of climate change – older people, low-income groups, tenants, among the others<sup>5</sup>. Lower-income groups within countries suffer higher losses than the wealthier groups: the income losses caused by climate change of the bottom 40% are almost 70% larger than the average in low- and middle-income countries.

Usually, climate change policies are developed and implemented separately to policies that tackle

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<sup>1</sup> Climate change is already killing us, but strong action now can prevent more deaths, Statement by WHO Regional Director for Europe Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, 7 November 2022, [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

<sup>2</sup> IPCC, The evidence is clear: the time for action is now. We can halve emissions by 2030., April 4, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Ipsos & EDF, Mobilization, concern or indifference: how do the citizens of 30 countries view climate change?, December 2021

<sup>4</sup> Agyeman, J., & Schlosberg, D. (2014). Toward an intersectional environmental justice framework. In D. Schlosberg, J. Carruthers, & A. Cole (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of environmental justice* (pp. 66-78). Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Climate Change and social justice: an evidence review, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014

social inequality, poverty and disadvantage<sup>6</sup>. How can social justice be integrated within the energy transition and climate change action? Climate justice issues must be more aligned with government agendas, with cross-sectoral policies based on a broader definition of “vulnerability”. Moreover, the short-sighted, emergency approach needs to be abandoned in favour of a **long-term approach that aims at building the infrastructure and institutions needed to enhance climate resilience among all social groups**<sup>7</sup>. The green transition should be seen as an opportunity to go beyond the trade-off between climate action and economic growth, creating new job opportunities in fields such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable transportation. Governments and businesses can prioritize training and hiring workers from marginalized communities to ensure that these jobs are accessible to everyone<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, in order to involve everyone in the green transition, energy democracy (meaning that everyone should have a say in how their energy is produced and used) should be promoted.

**Climate injustice**<sup>9</sup> is reflected not only in the different exposure of different social groups to the impact of climate change within the same country but also in the **different contribution and exposure of entire countries to these disastrous effects**.

Countries that are only recently experiencing economic growth or that have always been considered economically “less developed” are more exposed to the impact of climate disasters and have had a weaker cumulative impact on environmental pollution, compared to today’s richer countries. Even though the international decision to establish a Loss and Damage Fund – made at Sharm El-Sheikh’s COP 27 in 2022 – is good news, it still leaves much unsolved and raises many doubts (e.g., **who benefits? Who pays?**).

**How can the energy transition take these inequalities into account, making the green transition a true occasion to tackle social justice?**

### **STUDENTS DEVELOPMENT:**

According to Williams et al. (2019)<sup>10</sup>, energy justice is defined as “**the distribution of benefits and burdens of energy systems and their impacts across different social groups, and the recognition of the need for democratic participation in energy decision-making**”. The idea of energy justice is rooted in the recognition that **access to energy is a fundamental human right**, and that energy systems should be designed and managed in a fair and equitable way for all (Huhta, 2023)<sup>11</sup>. In this context, justice is understood as the fair distribution of benefits and burdens across different social groups and generations. Therefore, the end goal of energy justice is to improve social, economic, and health burdens on individuals historically impacted by the energy system, commonly referred to as “frontline communities” (Williams et al., 2019). The concept of is closely related to the idea of a just energy transition, which refers to the move from a fossil fuel-based energy system to one based on renewable energy that is equitable and benefits all members of society so to lessen to lessen climate change and cut greenhouse gas emissions.

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<sup>6</sup> Newell, P., Srivastava, S., Naess, L.O., Torres Contreras, G.A., Price, R., Roz Price, Toward transformative climate justice: An emerging research agenda, August 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.733>

<sup>7</sup> Chancel, L., Bothe, P., Voituriez, T., Climate Inequality Report 2023, World Inequality Lab, January 30, 2023, <https://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CBV2023-ClimateInequalityReport-3.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Joint Research Center, Caramizaru, A., Uihlein, A., Energy communities: an overview of energy and social innovation, 2020

<sup>9</sup> Simmons, D., What is ‘climate justice’? Yale Climate Connections, July 29, 2020

<sup>10</sup> Williams, S. et al. (2019). Justice in energy transitions. Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions. Volume 31, 144-153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2018.12.001>

<sup>11</sup> Huhta, K. (2023). Conceptualizing energy justice in the context of human rights law. Nordic Journal of Human Rights. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2023.2210443>

The notion of energy justice is intricate and multifaceted, demanding a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach. This is due to the strong correlation between the energy transition and social justice, which will be elaborated upon through the following crucial points:

Firstly, it is crucial to recognize that the **consequences of climate change are not evenly distributed across the globe**. Instead, they disproportionately affect marginalized communities and vulnerable populations in various regions around the world. For instance, countries like Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Yemen are grappling with the severe impacts of climate change, including water shortages, extreme weather events, and rising sea levels, which significantly disrupt the lives and livelihoods of their inhabitants.

Secondly, one of the main solutions today to reduce climate change is through the usage of clean energy sources. However, a key challenge lies in the affordability of these clean energy options, particularly for some communities that may already be economically disadvantaged. The initial costs associated with installing renewable energy infrastructure and implementing new technologies can be substantial, making it difficult for certain communities to access and benefit from these solutions.

Finally, prominently featured in government initiatives around the world, particularly those focusing on 'green recovery' and 'building back better,' the topic of job creation/destruction is crucial to distributive justice. Issues such as reductions in poverty, empowerment of vulnerable groups, skills diversification, and the provision of high-quality jobs become relevant in the just distribution of the costs and benefits of energy infrastructure among the whole population. As Sovacool et al. (2022)<sup>12</sup> argue, the extent of job creation or destruction can shape the social acceptance and desirability of different low-carbon pathways and lead to social mobilization to support or oppose future energy transitions.

- How can we effectively address the climate change challenge and promote energy transition as a global agenda? Specifically, how do we navigate the dilemma between implementing radical improvements or changes that yield immediate positive effects but might have negative long-term consequences, versus pursuing incremental changes that guarantee only positive outcomes but require more time to be effective? How can we balance the urgency to act quickly with the need for sustainable, long-term solutions?
- How to mitigate the disparities of the burden of climate change that marginalized populations are already facing and will face more and more?
- How to enhance engagement and participation of frontline communities on a global scale?
- How to make decision making processes inclusive of underrepresented populations and indigenous communities?
- How can the issue of affordability of clean energy be addressed?
- How to make the energy transition pro-poor and just in the job creation?

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<sup>12</sup> Sovacool et al. (2022). Conflicted transitions: Exploring the actors, tactics, and outcomes of social opposition against energy infrastructure. *Global Environmental Change*, 73, 102473. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2022.102473>