

Research Brief: Justice and Fairness in the Transition to a Zero Carbon Economy

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Context / issue

The decarbonisation of the world economy is arguably one of the most urgent and difficult challenges facing humanity this century. The transition to a zero carbon world will bring immense benefits, quite apart from the mitigation of climate change (see Green 2015). But it will also cause profound disruption, dislocation and loss to many workers, households, communities and business corporations, at least in the short term.

As climate policy and legislation become increasingly stringent, the putative ‘losers’ from such changes can be expected to assert ever stronger political claims for transitional relief and assistance. One prominent class of transitional claimants has been emissions-intensive business corporations seeking compensation for lost asset value (see, e.g., Menezes, Quiggin, and Wagner 2009). Another development has been the loudening calls from parts of the organised labour movement, echoed by other civil society actors, for ‘just transition’ policies to accompany climate change mitigation (see, e.g., Rosemberg 2010). ‘Just transition’ ideas are being increasingly taken seriously by mainstream political parties and legislatures. For example, the Australian Labor Party and Australian Greens both included a just transition strategy in their 2016 federal election manifestos.

Research question / agenda

This research agenda focuses on the following primary question: how *should* governments respond to transitional effects (especially losses) as the world decarbonises? Subsidiary questions include: Which kinds of losers (if any) should receive transitional assistance, for which kinds of losses, and why? Does it make a difference whether transitional losses have been caused by a proximate policy or legal reform (e.g. a carbon price) in the relevant jurisdiction, as opposed to mere changes in technology or market structure? How should governments treat transitional *winners*? What does it mean for a transition to be “just”?

I am currently undertaking a PhD on a related topic that is one sense narrower and in one sense broader than this proposal: I am answering the narrower question of how governments should respond to transitional effects proximately caused by *their legal/policy reforms*, but I am looking at legal/policy reforms *in general* (i.e. a range of cases, including but not limited to climate change). My PhD work is normative, traversing normative political, legal and economic theory, yet strongly informed by empirical case studies and close engagement with empirical social sciences. I would be interested to connect with other researchers working on similar issues in the climate context.

References

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