

Policy Brief

Towards a Just Transition Away from Plastic Pollution

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Provisions for a just transition away from plastic pollution have been viewed as necessary in the ongoing negotiations towards an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution (henceforth, plastics treaty).¹ In this context, just transition means ensuring that measures taken to end plastic pollution are fair, equitable and inclusive for all stakeholders across the plastics lifecycle by safeguarding livelihoods and communities impacted by plastic pollution and corresponding control measures.

A just transition entails recognising the inequitably distributed impacts of plastic pollution across the plastics lifecycle, ensuring decent and green work opportunities and conditions for affected communities and workers across the plastics value chain, reducing inequalities, particularly among women and youth, and leaving no-one behind in the transition towards ending plastic pollution.² This policy brief provides insights into the emergence of just transition as a multilateral policy priority and key considerations for ensuring a just transition across the plastic value chain.

A just transition in the multilateral policy arena

A just transition is linked to the universally recognised human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment³ and International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions and standards, including the ILO declaration on social justice for a fair globalisation,⁴ fundamental principles of rights and work,⁵ strengthening of the social and solidarity economy⁶⁻⁷ and the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda (employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue),⁸ the latter being integral elements of SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.⁹

- Spearheaded by labour unions and environmental justice movements since the 1960s, the just transition concept emerged in response to green transitions from coal, energy, climate change, and most recently, plastic pollution and efforts to safeguard affected communities and workers.¹⁰⁻¹¹
- The just transition concept has been incorporated into multilateral climate talks via the Copenhagen Summit (COP15) and the Paris Agreement (COP21) and was the focus of the Just Transition Silesia Declaration signed by 56 governments at COP24 in Katowice, Poland,¹² that encouraged 'taking into consideration the issue of just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent and quality jobs. A new plastics treaty can also integrate these concerns irrespective of the means of implementation adopted.
- Whilst forecasts suggest that measures taken in the context of the plastics treaty can have a net positive impact on jobs,¹³ just transition in other contexts has entailed a range of impacts on labour, including job creation, job substitution, job elimination, job transformation and job redefinition.¹⁴
- Different types of justice are relevant for the development and implementation of the plastics treaty, including those related to unequal distribution (of costs and benefits), recognition (of relevant affected communities and workers) and procedure (the active and meaningful participation of affected stakeholders in policy design and decision-making processes).¹⁵ Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration and the Aarhus Convention is particularly relevant to ensure a participatory plastics treaty.¹⁶
- Evidence suggests that just transition considerations can increase public support for transitions away from fossil fuels and petrochemicals and avoid obstruction from those challenged by the proposed policy changes at hand, within the broader objective of reducing the pollution burden on people and communities in vulnerable and marginalised situations.¹⁷
- Parameters and principles of a 'just' circular economy¹⁸, oftentimes reflect the pursuit of the socio-ecological win-win situation of placing waste pickers (in accordance with International Alliance of Waste Pickers' inclusive definition^{19,A}) at the heart of the transition towards ending plastic pollution, within the broader objective of reducing the pollution burden on people and communities in vulnerable and marginalised situations.²⁰ This was also reflected in the Member State-led Just Transition Initiative launched during INC-1 and possible core obligations discussed during INC-2.

^A Including individuals involved in the collection, segregation, sorting, transporting, and sale of recyclables in an informal or semi-formal capacity as own account workers, within the informal or semi-formal sorting/recovery/recycling sector, and any of the above who have been integrated in municipal waste management or occupy new roles in recycling organisations.

A just transition across the plastics lifecycle

The transboundary impacts of plastic pollution adversely affect environments, human health, and sustainable development across the plastics life cycle,²¹ particularly impacting people in low-income, marginalised communities.²²⁻²³ The systemic changes required to address the causes of plastic pollution across scales are also likely to impact certain communities, livelihoods, and industries more than others^{24,25}. A just transition is key to addressing these environmental and socio-economic injustices and protecting the rights of workers and communities who continue to be disproportionately impacted by plastic pollution and corresponding control measures.²⁶

- Environmental injustices across the plastics lifecycle commonly affect Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) displaced by deforestation for oil extraction²⁷, living in near proximity of petrochemical plants²⁸ and in coastal areas dependent on marine resources.²⁹⁻³⁰
- Workers operating without adequate health and safety standards across the plastics value chain are adversely affected, particularly informal and otherwise marginalised waste workers and communities working and living under hazardous and exploitative conditions without recognition and access to social protection,³¹ oftentimes in near proximity of waste dumps and open burning sites.³²⁻³³
- The active and meaningful participation of affected stakeholders from the planning phase in relevant decision-making processes is key to achieving a just transition and avoiding unintended socio-economic and environmental consequences.³⁴
- Assessments of social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts across diverse contexts³⁵ are needed to better understand potential implications of plastics reduction measures (e.g. substitution) in plastics intensive and adjacent industries (e.g. healthcare, agriculture, and food provision).
- To ensure a just transition it will be critical to avoid mechanisms and means of implementation that may exacerbate social inequalities or violate human rights, while ensuring strong regulatory controls to enhance transparency and accountability for environmental injustices and providing the technical and financial assistance necessary to support a just transition.³⁶

A just transition for plastics workers

A just transition is necessary for all affected plastics workers, including waste pickers and Indigenous, and otherwise marginalised peoples working in the plastics value chain (including extraction, production, manufacture, distribution, waste management, remediation, and removal).

- A just transition is particularly key for the 20 million waste pickers³⁷ who contribute to reduce plastic pollution by recovering 58% of recycled post-consumer plastic waste globally.³⁸ Waste pickers and other informal waste workers contribute to cleaner communities, public health, circular waste management systems³⁹, municipal savings⁴⁰, and reduced climate emissions.⁴¹
- Waste pickers should be recognised as key stakeholders in strategies to reduce plastic pollution and included in the development and implementation of related policies, including in extended producer responsibility (EPR) systems⁴². Social protection, job protection, and safeguarding measures must be considered to avoid negatively affecting waste pickers' livelihoods when moving from open dumps to sanitary landfills and in efforts to professionalize waste management services.⁴³
- The zero waste hierarchy⁴⁴ could guide the reskilling of workers across the plastics value chain, prioritising transitions away from disposable virgin plastics production towards safe and equitable plastic free and zero waste systems for safe and sustainable reuse, refill, and recycling.

A just transition for workers in the plastics value chain should include protection of human and labour rights, access to social services and healthcare programs, fair remuneration, inclusive EPR systems, and the provision of financial and technical support to establish or strengthen safe and sustainable reuse, repair, and recycling facilities.^{45,46} These measures could be included in a treaty Article, linked to an Annex and guidance documents that support governments in the implementation of co-defined just transition principles and practices, and in the development of national plans.⁴⁶ The establishment of a dedicated just transition fund⁴⁷ may support implementation and channel resources to safeguard livelihoods and communities disproportionately impacted by plastic pollution and corresponding control measures.

^B These efforts could build on experiences from SWaCH (India), Ground Score Association (USA), Amelior (France), FACCyR (Argentina), and the MNCR (Brazil), where both affiliated and unaffiliated waste pickers obtain better working conditions.

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