



The political challenge of achieving transformations to 1.5°C – the role of social justice



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Limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels to avoid dangerous and irreversible climate change will require rapid and profound transformations of our political, economic and social systems, as well as the technologies that underlie and connect them. Social justice has been employed as a frame to increase the political feasibility of these potentially dramatic and difficult changes. However, while a social justice lens can focus attention on the most vulnerable populations and promote political will for action, justice-focused arguments may also be used to help make a case against climate action. Building a low-carbon, resilient world therefore requires careful thinking about when and how the concept of social justice can be employed to motivate climate action in the political sphere.

Social justice has long been central in global climate change debates. The Paris Agreement acknowledges the importance of human rights, including those of vulnerable groups, and the role of equity in implementing the Agreement. More specifically, it notes the importance of ‘climate justice’ when taking action to address climate change.¹ This highlights the need to consider social justice in future plans for decarbonization.

This Knowledge Brief is based on a peer-reviewed article² that assesses the role of social justice as an organizing principle to enhance the political feasibility of a dramatic decarbonization trajectory.

A social justice lens focuses attention on:

- protecting vulnerable people from the impacts of climate change
- shielding people from the disruptions of transformation
- enhancing the vision and implementation of an equitable post-carbon society.

Political feasibility in this context refers to the degree to which rapid decarbonization is considered desirable and plausible in a given political system. It is subjective, grounded in the material realities of a society, and it changes over time. Until recently, 2.0°C has been seen as being at the limit of what is politically feasible, but now this needs to be pushed even further to realize ambitious – but necessary – 1.5°C trajectories.

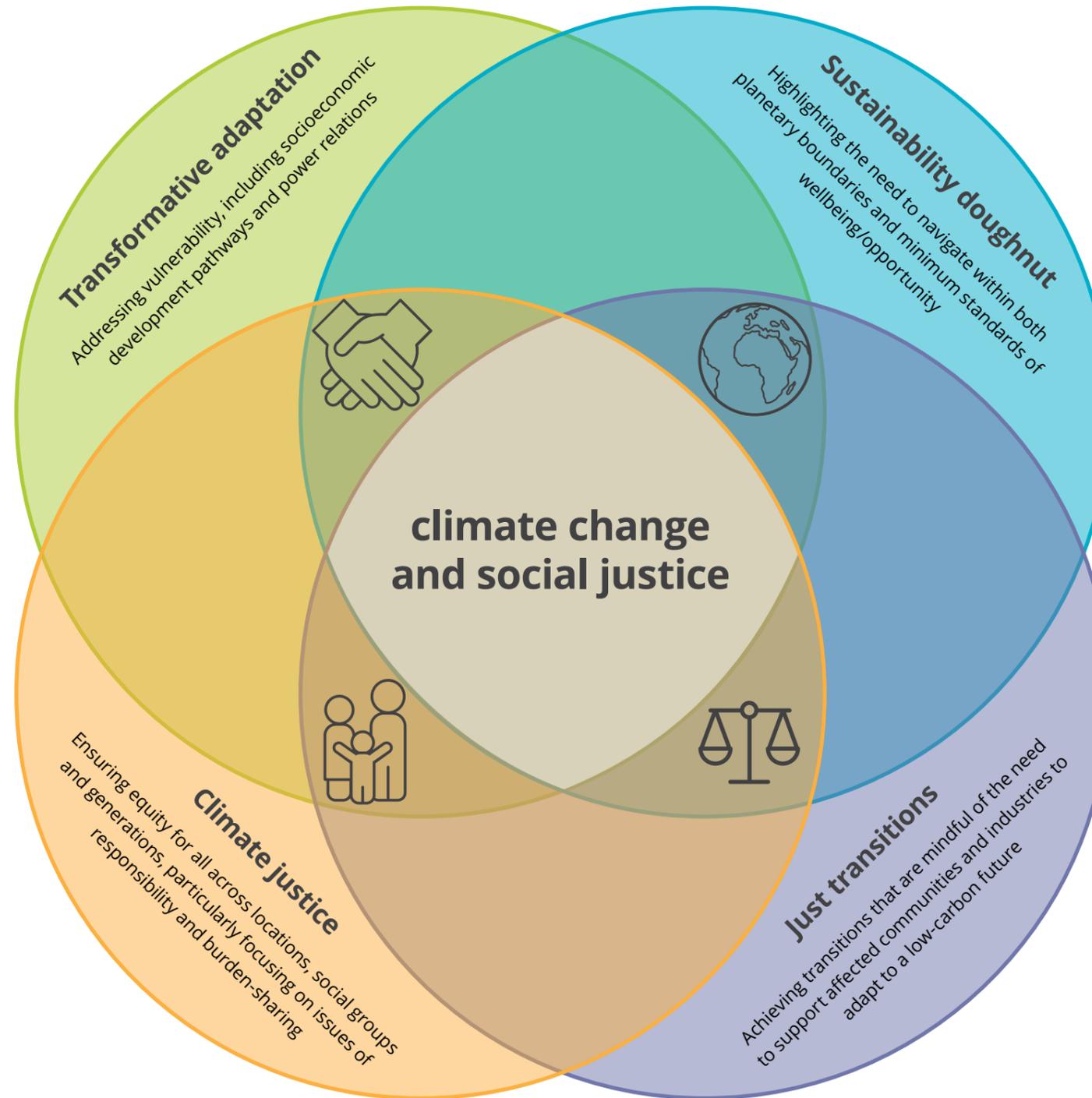
Transforming society

Research demonstrates that, while decarbonization may be technically and economically feasible, political barriers frequently get in the way. Social justice is one consideration among many that can influence political feasibility.

The concept of social justice broadly concerns moral questions about how and where resources and wealth are distributed across society. Practically, moral arguments and notions of fairness are likely to be presented both in favour of and against climate action. For example, in Germany, justice arguments about electricity costs have been used with some success to argue for the dismantling of subsidies for renewable energy.³ The concept of justice in the climate change debate is multi-faceted and contested, concerning the questions of the fair distribution of benefits and burdens, the design of just institutions for decision-making, recognition of pre-existing conditions, and responsibilities to future generations.

Four prominent but overlapping approaches to social justice, each with a specific focus, can be distinguished in the climate change and sustainability literature:

- **Transformative adaptation:** the importance of political economic structures in producing vulnerability, and the different capacities of actors to respond to climate change.
- **Sustainability doughnut:** the 'upper' limit of planetary ecological boundaries and the 'lower' limit of the social conditions required for human development and wellbeing.
- **Climate justice:** the multiple facets of equity, since all peoples and social groups of the world have a right to the same environmental 'space'.
- **Just transitions:** building a transition pathway that takes account of justice issues and includes a broad group of stakeholders – including novel or unusual alliances – in decision-making.



These approaches come to the topic of climate change and social justice from different angles, but collectively they indicate that a focus on social justice can increase the political feasibility of ambitious decarbonization trajectories in three key ways.

Protecting vulnerable people from the impacts of climate change: Those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are often also subject to other types of inequality – for example, lack of economic opportunity, social marginalization, or lesser benefit from past carbon-emitting activities. Aligning the decarbonization agenda with other pressing social issues (e.g. education, gender equity, indigenous rights) can promote more inclusive decision-making and build wider support for societal transformation.

Shielding people from the disruptions of transformation: Some groups that are disadvantaged by climate action could become sources of resistance (e.g. fossil fuel industry employees, advocates for low-cost energy). Broadening the frame of climate action to address legitimate concerns may require additional resources, but should be regarded as an essential part of building the political case for decarbonization actions.

Enhancing the vision and implementation of an equitable post-carbon society: A social justice lens can help to frame the future vision by suggesting how societal transformation could take place. This can be helpful in sparking novel ideas in political debates. It can also highlight the urgent need for action in the face of irreversible 'tipping points'. Social justice focuses attention on the moral dimensions of climate change, and this could have considerable influence on attitudes in civil society, prompting citizen-led, democratic support for climate action.

Implications for the political feasibility of 1.5°C transformations

Theoretical interpretations of social justice and how they are applied in socio-political debates are context-specific. In some contexts, a social justice frame may have limited relevance or lack traction in climate change policy discussions. Thus, implications are mixed and further research is required to understand under what conditions a social justice frame will increase the political feasibility of ambitious climate action. Nonetheless, it is clear that just transitions will require new alliances that go beyond traditional

actors (e.g. between environmentalists, trade unions, industry bodies, regulators and communities) in order to anticipate and avoid negative perceptions and backlash against climate action. The urgency of promoting ambitious decarbonization trajectories to limit global warming to 1.5°C is clear, and proactive, strategic engagement with social justice considerations (whether made explicit or not) will be critical for effective and ethical societal transformations.

Key messages

- Limiting global warming and preventing irreversible climate change will depend on transforming our societies, and there is an urgent need to make social transformation more politically feasible.
- The concept of social justice can be useful in focusing attention on vulnerable populations and promoting political will for decarbonization, but can also have unintended consequences in building arguments against climate action.
- Efforts to engage social justice to promote the political feasibility of climate action therefore need to take a proactive approach and consider a broad range of social concerns.
- Further research should examine the conditions under which social justice supports ambitious climate action towards decarbonization, and how the diverse aspects of justice should be best addressed in different situations.

- 1 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. 2015. Paris Agreement (https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf).
- 2 Patterson, J.J., Thaler, T., Hoffmann, M., Hughes, S., Oels, A., Chu, E., Mert, A., Huitema, D., Burch, S. and Jordan, A. 2018. Political feasibility of 1.5°C societal transformation: the role of social justice. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, Vol. 31, pp. 1–9 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2017.11.002>).
- 3 Lauber, V. and Jacobsson, S. 2016. The politics and economics of constructing, contesting and restricting socio-political space for renewables – The German Renewable Energy Act. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, Vol. 18, pp. 147–163.

This Knowledge Brief is one of a series based on recent peer-reviewed research on social transformations to sustainability. The article on which it is based can be accessed free [here for more information and citation purposes](#). The Knowledge Brief has been prepared by the Transformations to Sustainability (T2S) programme secretariat in collaboration with James Patterson, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University. The views it expresses do not necessarily represent those of the International Science Council, nor the programme's funders, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

The T2S programme defines transformation as “a profound and complex socio-ecological process with both short- and long-term implications for the sustainability of natural and social systems”. The aim of this series of briefs is to help disseminate knowledge about social transformations to sustainability as widely as possible.



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