

Transition to low carbon economy must be inclusive, say researchers

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The success of measures aimed at reducing the impact of climate change depend greatly on place, time and social contexts, according to a new policy briefing involving a University of York academic.

Experts from the COP26 Universities Network, a group of more than 40 UK-based universities working to deliver the aims of the UN Climate Summit, argued that the costs of some climate change policies can exacerbate social inequalities if [local communities](#) are not involved in the decision making.

The briefing paper, co-authored by University of York Geographer and Urban and Regional Planner, Dr. Joshua Kirshner, discussed the importance of [policy](#) being developed in partnership with communities, to help ensure that the costs and benefits of ambitious climate action are shared in a fair and equitable way.

Blind spot

Dr. Joshua Kirshner, from the University of York's Department of Environment and Geography, said: "There tends to be 'blind spots' in the way we understand the effects of climate change and related policy responses. The most marginalized communities can be the ones that lose out the most, often due to the high costs of implementing low-carbon measures in the local community. Moving [energy production](#) and distribution closer to the end-users is one way of empowering communities to develop local energy resilience to disasters and extreme events, as opposed to central government making blanket decisions for all areas, giving advantages to some but not others."

Just outcomes

The paper identifies five areas that need further consideration when discussing decarbonisation:

- Job creation in itself does not deliver "just" outcomes—the types of jobs, what they pay, how secure they are, who has access to

them, and what ripple effects they cause in the local economy matters

- The effects of climate change and related policy responses will be experienced differently; effects are felt differently across genders, ethnicities, class and age, as well as across space and different geographies
- A just transition to a low carbon economy will look very different in a developing country context; additional support is needed for developing countries, whose growth and employment rates in some cases remain closely linked with carbon emissions
- Social backlash is likely if the transition is not perceived to be just; stakeholder voices need to be heard in discussion and decision making, creating "policy shapers" rather than passive "policy takers"
- Businesses and investors can help mitigate negative social impacts of the transition; public and private- sector firms will be key partners in implementing socially inclusive decarbonisation policies.

Pandemic

Dr. Tom Pegram, from University College London (UCL), co-lead author of the briefing, said: "The individuals, households and communities that stand to be most negatively affected by decarbonisation policies are often already losing out in existing socio-economic arrangements."

"With current pandemic policies disproportionately affecting low-skilled workers, minorities, women and other vulnerable groups, COVID-19 has served as a stark reminder that socio-economic disruptions tend to worsen existing social inequalities."

Success and failure

Dr. Kirshner also argued that policymakers could learn from the success and failures of other countries around the world, including those with varying political coalitions and orientations, when developing climate change measures for the UK.

He said: "A growing number of countries, such as Costa Rica, Cuba, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, South Africa and Spain, have legislated on a just transition to a low carbon economy, creating task forces and incorporating social concerns into long term policy planning. Sub-national policy experimentation, such as in the US state of California, also provides examples for enabling complex, large-scale transitions. These are places that we can look to in order to scale-up success in the UK."

No silver bullet

Researchers argue that although there is no silver bullet approach to delivering a just transition to net zero, they have identified a number of tools for policymakers to meet targets whilst also upholding social justice. These include more democratic engagement platforms, such as Citizen Assemblies, and independent / interdisciplinary research across climate, energy and environmental justice to inform effective policy, as well as establishing independent advisory bodies.

Professor Simone Abram, from the University of Durham, co-lead author on the briefing, said: "Future decarbonisation might be expensive in the short term for manufacturing industries and transport services, even if the longer-term benefits are enormous, so now is the time to rethink our goals. Given the scale and urgency of the changes we need, we have to stay focused on the need to ensure that the benefits of the

transition to a low carbon economy can be shared by all."

Provided by University of York

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